A CERTIFIED BRIDE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

MINT WALK
THE RUSSET JACKET
THE HONEY-POT
BACK TO THE HONEY-POT
THE GOLDEN SNAIL
HAND PAINTED

A Certified Bride

by

COUNTESS
BARCYNSKA



HURST & BLACKETT, LTD.
PATERNOSTER HOUSE, E.C.4

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE woman in the cubby-hole that did duty for office at the Hotel Beffroi kept up her jabber of Flemish-French. Denys Stoughton could make nothing of it. All he wanted was to secure a bedroom, have a wash, and change his clothes. The hotel porter stood stolidly by with his two suitcases, waiting to hear where he should bestow them.

Stoughton repeated his request in good French. The woman recognised it as little as he did her own guttural *patois*. In desperation she slapped on to the counter the usual registration form, indicating in dumb show that he should fill it in. As this was printed in French as well as Flemish the prime difficulty vanished. Stoughton made the necessary entries, signed it and handed the paper back.

The result was astonishing. After one glance at it her manner underwent a complete change. The suspicious scowl that she had given him on his entrance was replaced by the nearest approach to a smile that her heavy face seemed capable of. She nodded and gesticulated amiably. Had such a thing been possible

he might have imagined that he had been expected at the hotel and that his signature, like the countersign to a sentry, gave him freedom of movement within it. She gave the porter rapid instructions in her own unintelligible language, including apparently the number of a bedroom, for he promptly set off with the luggage up the staircase.

Stoughton followed him up two flights. There the man stopped, unlocked a door, threw it open and signed to him to enter. The room displayed signs of being already occupied; but Stoughton had no time to do more than observe the fact, for the man went straight across to a door on its further side and conducted him through it into a second bedroom. In this he dumped down his burden, muttered what might have been the Flemish equivalent of "There you are, sir," and took himself off.

Denys took the whole singular proceeding imperturbably. He was sufficiently accustomed to foreign hotels not to be surprised at it. It seemed to be the rule in all the smaller ones for the bedrooms to lead into one another. Still, as the one he was now installed in had a second door that gave on to the landing, he could not help speculating as to why the porter had not brought him in by it.

"Odd people these Flammandes," he reflected. "I expect I shall have a bit of trouble to make myself understood, unless there's somebody in the place who talks reasonable French. That woman's jargon down-

stairs left me guessing. What the deuce is the Flemish for hot water ? "

He looked around for a bell. There was no sign of one.

" Must get this grime off with cold, I suppose."

Followed much splashing in a basin of inadequate dimensions, then a change of clothes and the bestowal of belongings in wardrobe and drawers.

So an hour passed. Denys Stoughton was in no hurry. The mirror on his dressing-table where he stood adjusting his tie gave back the reflection of a personable man of thirty-five whose dark hair was greying over the temples. The clean-shaven face was a pleasing one. The eyes, rather deep set, were a clear grey, the lips shapely, the chin on the firm side. The hands fiddling with the tie indicated, more than anything else, the character behind the face. They were masculine enough, but long-fingered—the hands of a craftsman.

The room he was in lay at the back of the house and silence pervaded it. He had not been conscious of this quietude. When, therefore, it was suddenly broken by an unexpected near-by sound he stood rigid, all his senses concentrated in his ears.

The sound was repeated. It developed into a succession of muted sobs—a woman's sobs. Instinctively Stoughton swung round and looked at the communicating door.

They came from that direction. The door stood an inch or so ajar. He had forgotten to close it. Averse

to intruding on a neighbour's privacy, he tiptoed across intending to do so As he raised his hand to the latch, the door opened more widely. And he found himself looking into the distressed and startled brown eyes of an uncommonly pretty young woman.

CHAPTER II

"Oh, I beg your pardon . . . I didn't know . . ."

"I *am* so sorry. I'm afraid I forgot to shut the door. I was just about to do so."

They spoke simultaneously, both instinctively in English The girl, clad only in a short dressing-wrapper over her underclothes, flushed with embarrassment Denys smiled—a purposeful smile intended to restore her equanimity. She certainly looked as if she had quite lost it. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

Denys' smile evaporated at sight of those tears. A solicitous look came into his face.

"I say, is anything the matter?" he enquired. "You look awfully upset."

"It—it's nothing," she stammered, shrinking away.

"Really nothing? You're sure? Because if there is I——"

She dabbed at her face with her handkerchief; she shook her head; disconsolate actions, both. She didn't altogether retire back into her room. Denys' expression of concern seemed to detain her.

"I'm sorry I'm making such a fool of myself," she

went on woefully. " I didn't know I should be disturbing anyone. I thought your room was empty. It has been for the last three days. That's why I opened the door."

"No apology's necessary, I assure you," he said in the most amiable of tones.

She *was* pretty. His artist's eye was taking in every detail of that prettiness. It wanted to register her shapeliness, its contours ; the articulation of ankle and knee ; the turn of the small wrist ; the svelte head ; the natural wave of chestnut-tinted hair ; the delicate features of her face brimful of expression—in short the full tale of her symmetry and colouring. He surveyed everything about her in terms of a picture. He didn't want her to go.

But she did. Kind as his eyes were, their scrutiny sent her flying.

" Thanks," she said, and pulled the door to.

CHAPTER III

DENYS dropped into the one armchair his room boasted, lit a cigarette and did some thinking.

"Queer," he said to himself.

Why had the porter brought him to his room through hers? There had been no necessity for it. And what was wrong with the girl? Sobbing her heart out! An English girl too. What was she doing alone in Euzentern—this remote little Belgian town? Somehow he took it for granted that she was alone.

Denys knew the country pretty well, from Liège to Brussels; from Bruges to Yprês; and yet he had never heard of Euzentern until two days ago. It was not a place that tourists favoured. If they did the local people would know something of the English language. That they didn't he had been convinced of soon after setting foot in the place. Nobody had a word of it at the railway station, neither had the cabman who had brought him to the hotel; and at the hotel itself, as he had just and proof, they could barely understand French.

An uncommonly pretty girl alone in Euzentern! And weeping! Why?

He gave it up at last. After all, it was no concern of his. He had come to Euzentern to make sketches and studies of its seventeenth-century church and quaint gabled houses, not to get interested in strangers, pretty or otherwise. That reminded him. He got up and sorted out his drawing materials: blocks, pencils, pastels —the artist's paraphernalia. Then, as it was nearing six o'clock and he hadn't eaten anything since leaving Bruges at midday, he went downstairs in search of dinner.

CHAPTER IV

At the door of the dining-room he was met by what he took to be the head waiter. It was mere guess-work, for the man wasn't costumed like one. It was only his ingratiating manner that suggested the assumption. He grinned at Denys as he ushered him into the room and without hesitation conducted him to a table laid for two. Seated at it was the girl whose acquaintance he had so unconventionally made upstairs. The waiter bowed and retired. Not more than half-a-dozen other diners were present; several of the other tables were unoccupied. Denys therefore hesitated before taking the vacant chair.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "Or would you prefer to be alone?"

"Much rather not," she replied readily. "Yes, do sit down. I haven't spoken to a soul for three whole days."

Denys sat down facing her.

"You can make up for lost time now, if you like. I'm a good listener."

"I don't think I'm a good talker." She gave him a shy smile.

"Then I'll set the ball rolling. The management here seem absolutely determined that we shall get to know one another. I hope you don't object."

"Not at all. I suppose we're the only English people in the hotel and the waiter thought . . ."

"That we ought to forgather. Yes, that must be it. Hadn't we better waive ceremony and make our own introductions? My name is Denys Stoughton."

"And mine Evelyn Stanton."

"Only the middle letters different!"

"Yes, the names *are* rather alike, aren't they?" Suddenly she grew thoughtful and a slight frown puckered her brows.

"I wonder . . ." she murmured. "But no, it's too silly!"

Denys gave her a look of polite enquiry.

She took half a minute to satisfy it. Then she said with considerable hesitation:

"I couldn't help wondering whether—by any chance—the hotel people had mistaken you—for someone else."

Denys was amused.

"Easily. Anybody else on earth, if it comes to that. But who *should* they mistake me for?"

"Well, I'm expecting my uncle, and I thought that, perhaps owing to the similarity of our names, and—and because of their density—not the names; the hotel people, you know—they had taken you to be him. I'm afraid that sounds rather mixed up, but wouldn't

it account for the waiter bringing you to my table ? "

" By Jove, yes ! So it does." Denys had it on the tip of his tongue to add : " And for putting me into the room next to yours."

" You see," she went on," I've had such awful difficulty in making them understand that I expected my uncle. It's that woman in the bureau, or whatever they call it. She's impossible. I can't follow a word she says. Her French might be Chinese for all I can make of it. And of course I'm equally unintelligible to her."

" Yes, that woman ! She's the absolute limit. I remember now. Directly she saw my name on the registration form a look of something like intelligence came into her face. She must have read Stoughton for Stanton. Well, I'm blest ! I say, hadn't I better disillusion her about—er—the relationship she attributes to us."

" Could you ? " she asked with a gurgle of laughter. " No, better not try. You'd only get hot over it and she'd be more mixed than ever."

" As long as you don't mind, then, we'll leave her to find out the mistake for herself."

" No, I don't mind. She'll do that to-morrow perhaps, when Mr. Cradeley—my uncle, you know—arrives."

" And meanwhile I'm cast for his part. Dashed funny ! To the best of my recollection this is the first time in my life I've ever been an uncle, even a

temporary one. You'll have to make allowances for me if I don't play the part to perfection."

" All right," she smiled. " It won't be for long."

Denys wouldn't have minded a week or two of such a niece. She looked very charming in her rather plain but well-cut frock of soft black silk; georgette, he supposed it was. In imagination he began drawing her beautifully-shaped hands and arms. They were bare to the shoulder. What age was she? Twenty-three?

And she was so unmistakably " all right." There was a look of race about her. She was in such pleasant contrast to the heavy Flemish women at the other tables and to the tripper type of female swarming all over Belgium at this summer season of the year.

Denys recognised his good luck in being thrown in the way of an unusually pretty girl, but he also reminded himself that the situation demanded caution. What would his wife, his fiery-tempered Joyce, say if she could see him now!

CHAPTER V

"My first avuncular privilege will be to order something to drink," said Denys rather jerkily to cover the disquieting thought of his wife. He began studying the wine list. "As a truant citizen of the United States, and one moreover who is no believer in prohibition, you will easily believe that to me the ordering of drinks is one of the chief pleasures of life."

"I didn't know you were an American."

"Sometimes I don't know it myself. Fifteen years of England and the Continent have cosmopolitanised me. They've also given me a discriminating taste in wines. We'll have a bottle of Château Yquem. How they come to have any of it in a one-horse place like this is beyond me. Nineteen-eleven too! It goes to prove that life is full of compensations."

"I'm so relieved that you didn't say champagne. Champagne in Euzentern would be rather like—what shall I say?—ice in the Arctic regions."

"Or hot water in hell. Either simile fits all right."

"But really, I don't want any wine," declared Evelyn. "I hardly ever drink it."

"I think I must insist. This—our meeting—is a special occasion. We *must* celebrate it. I'm sure your real uncle, if he were here, would want wine."

"Not he!" She made a slight grimace. "He would be ordering himself much whisky and soda and be quite inattentive to any of my wants."

Judging by the note of contempt in her voice, Denys gathered that she and her uncle were not on the best of terms.

"He's only my uncle by marriage," she hastily explained. "If there were anyone else I could look to . . ."

She broke off abruptly and attended to her dinner

Denys didn't ask for amplification of the unfinished sentence. He could guess, better than ever now, that Mr. Cradeley signified something altogether distasteful to her.

She allowed him to fill her glass with the Château Yquem. Her look of appreciation of its delicate bouquet impelled him to say:

"A woman who can't tell the difference between a wine like this and ordinary Bordeaux blanc is as tiresome as—a man who drinks too much." With a bow he added, "It's quite a treat to meet an exception."

From time to time he thought he surprised a look of melancholy in her face. It made him more than ever certain that she was in some trouble or difficulty. Nor had he forgotten those sobs upstairs. Once more, compassion for her descended on him. But what could he

do in the way of help or sympathy? Nothing, unless he could win her confidence.

As that ambition passed through his mind he noticed, not for the first time, that a youngish man, dressed in tweeds, who sat a little way off, was eyeing Miss Stanton and himself with some intentness. Presently the man rose, took an unnecessarily circuitous route to the door so as to pass close to their table, and looked back at it once as he went out of the room.

"Did you see how that man stared at us?" Evelyn asked.

Denys nodded. "What we call a 'rubber-neck' in America."

"Was he an American, do you think?"

"I doubt it. English, I should say, by the cut of his clothes. Vulgar curiosity isn't confined to the subjects of any particular country. Shall we go and have our coffee at one of the cafês of gay Euzentern?"

CHAPTER VI

EVELYN put on her hat and they set out together. A short walk brought them to the Grande Place, an old square in which stood the Hotel de Ville, and opposite it the tall belfry tower of Euzentern's picturesque church, whose bells just then were pealing out a joyous carillon.

"They have a lovely tone," Evelyn said. "But when you've heard them every quarter of an hour, day and night, as I have for three successive days, you get rather fed up with them."

That meant, thought Denys, that she slept badly. More evidence that something was worrying her.

"If you want to get accustomed to bells," he rejoined, "you ought to go to Bruges. They're simply numberless there. Their chimes seem to be the staple industry of the town. This is nothing in comparison. What about having our coffee here?"

They had reached the Café de l'Univers, apparently the principal one of its kind in the town, judging by its comparatively wide and well-filled *terrasse*. Denys appropriated one of the small iron tables abutting on the pavement.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a liqueur with your

coffee," he said. "Belgian law doesn't allow the sale of anything spirituous in small doses. I've never been able to discover why, unless it's to irritate the after-dinner customer. Even the shops can't sell less than two litres at a time. So, if your uncle doesn't come provided with his own supply of whisky, he'll find it impossible to get an occasional peg when he wants one."

"I can assure you that my Uncle Bob won't find two litres of anything alcoholic an embarrassing proposition," Evelyn said caustically.

So "Uncle Bob" was a bibber as well as the possessor of other unpleasing traits. Denys hoped that he would not have to resign his self-constituted avuncular obligations to his fair companion until he could be certain that it was quite safe to do so.

Whilst sipping her coffee Evelyn asked Denys how long he had been in Belgium and why he had selected Euzentern for a visit.

"I know the country fairly well," he told her. "I'm on a sketching tour. I'd heard of Euzentern's old Gothic church of St. Bénoit, and thought I might find something in it worth making studies of. Every artist has a bit of the rover in him, you know."

"So you're an artist! How interesting. I can tell you, off hand, that you'll be captivated by the church. I know it rather well."

"You mean you've been here before? I thought Euzentern was quite off the map except to men of my profession."

" I was here last spring as secretary and companion to a lady. She died three weeks ago. You may have heard of her. Mrs. Maribon. She was awfully well up in art and architecture. Perhaps you know her book, ' The Cathedrals of Belgium ' ? She was writing it when I went to live with her, and I had the task of transcribing it. You can't think how interesting the work was, though it used to make me feel dreadfully ignorant."

" Then it was because of that previous visit you came here again ? " propounded Denys.

" No Because I knew it was a cheap place. Much cheaper than Brussels where Mrs. Maribon died."

Denys felt certain that at last he had penetrated the mystery of her tearful aspect in the bedroom and the look of depression he had once or twice since observed in her face. She had come to Euzentern " because it was cheap." That could only mean that she was hard up. She was waiting for her uncle to take her home. Ergo, she hadn't enough money to pay the fare. Stranded ! Poor little thing ! It was a wonder that she had any pluck left at all. Little predisposed as he was towards Mr. Cradeley, Denys knew he would not feel comfortable until he turned up.

" You were happy with Mrs. Maribon I suppose ? If so, you must miss her."

" I do. She was kind. She treated me almost like a daughter. That was what made it seem all the harder when her sister—to whom I wired when Mrs. Maribon

had her seizure—came over and treated me—well, not exactly nicely."

"And so then you thought of this place ?"

"I had to go somewhere," she shrugged. "Euzentern was the nearest."

"This sister. Didn't she offer to let you return with her ?"

"On the contrary, she turned me off before the funeral. I went to it all the same, though."

"What a brute she must be !" muttered Denys.

"I don't think Mrs. Maribon cared for her. They never corresponded as far as I know. It was only by chance that I discovered her address. . . . Well, that's enough of a miserable subject. I mustn't bore you."

"You couldn't do that, even if you tried. You poor little soul ! You must have had a rough time of it."

She didn't dispute that, so he continued :

"I hope there isn't any doubt about your uncle turning up."

"You *do* doubt it though, It's in your voice. Why do you ?"

"I'm sorry ; I can't help it. From what you've told me about him—more perhaps by your manner than anything else—I feel that he's not to be relied on. Forgive me if that sounds impertinent."

"No, it's not impertinent." She gave him one of her rare smiles. "Do you know, Mr. Stoughton, you must be very—what's the word ?—oh yes, perspicacious. I know my uncle pretty thoroughly, and yet it was only

this afternoon that I began to feel uncertain about him myself. You came to that conclusion almost on the spur of the moment." The serious look was in her face again. "I wonder whether you're right."

Denys jumped at the assumption.

"Just for argument's sake let us assume I *am* right. If he fails you won't you be—well, rather in a hole? No, no, let me have my say out, please. If it should happen that you have nobody else to rely on I want you to remember that I'm here—very much at your service I can't say how glad I should be if you'd make use of me."

Evelyn gave him a grateful look. She had always heard that Americans were chivalrous to women, and her instinct told her that this one was no exception to the rule. Incidentally, of course, she would have thought the same of him had he been a Spaniard or a Turk. It was the *ego* in him, the intrinsic fineness of his character that she detected and considered, not his particular nationality. But she dreaded being mistaken for one of those girls who tell hard-luck stories to casual acquaintances in order to stir up their compassion and generosity, and she almost regretted her talkativeness

"It's most awfully kind of you," she said. "But I really shan't need any help. I'm convinced I shall have a letter from my aunt to-morrow, or at latest the day after. Thank you ever so much all the same. Don't you think we'd better stroll back now? I'm rather tired. I didn't get much sleep last night."

CHAPTER VII

ALTHOUGH it was barely ten o'clock, the streets were deserted. Except for the lingerers at the Café de l'Univers, Euzentern's inhabitants seemed to have gone to bed.

A moon had risen, flooding the deserted expanse of the Grande Place with pale radiance that, helped by the pervading silence, lent an eerie glamour to the sombre scene whose main features were the contrasting deep shadows thrown by the pointed façades of the old Flemish houses on the silvered roadway. The belfry tower stood up black against the dark purple of the sky. The darkened houses seemed like habitations of the dead, guarding impenetrable secrets.

Denys and Evelyn said little on their way to the hotel. Both were wrapped in thought. On arrival there the somnolent porter kept them waiting some minutes before admitting them.

"They certainly believe in the early-closing movement in this town," Denys observed. "I don't see why we should conform to it, though. I think I'll

shock the establishment by smoking a final cigarette in the lounge."

His hand went out to Evelyn.

" Good-night, my dear. Sleep well and don't worry. You *were* worrying this evening before dinner, you know."

She summoned up a smile and went slowly up the staircase.

CHAPTER VIII

THE sun was pouring into the room when Denys awoke While trying sleepily to collect his wits sufficiently to enable him to ring for hot water and his coffee, the door leading into Evelyn's room opened and the valet de chambre entered.

In his execrable Flemish-French he enquired if Denys would have his *café complet* with madame? So confused with sleep was Denys that the full purport of this question did not dawn upon him. At the moment he merely said "No," and told the man not to derange madame in future by coming in through her room. He wanted his coffee and hot water as quickly as possible.

After the man had gone the true inwardness of the situation entered Denys' sleep-bemused head, startling him into complete wakefulness.

Good heavens! the hotel people mistook him for Evelyn's *husband*, not her uncle! Oh, the density of these Flammandes! Of course it was that infernal woman in the bureau. She had satisfied herself right off that a husband was expected. Degrees of relationship and the words that conveyed them were nothing

to her. Her dense brain was of the sort that didn't know the difference. Or she simply didn't care. Probably that. Anyway, the communicating bedrooms and the shared table were now accounted for. And he himself had since complicated matters by referring to Evelyn as "madame."

In his agitation he leapt out of bed and walked about the room, puzzling his brains for some way of rectifying the mistake. He felt that it was up to him to do so. It was too much to expect that she should. Pusillanimous too. Of course the assumption that they were man and wife was not his fault, but to leave it uncontradicted would simply confirm it.

And then another aspect of the affair struck him. Suppose his wife got to hear of it True there was not much likelihood of that, but one never knew. The world was mighty small. Just now Belgium was swarming with tourists. There was a distinct risk that some acquaintance of Joyce's might turn up at the hotel and go back to spread the report that he was posing as the husband of an uncommonly pretty girl. In her jealousy she would credit every word of such a story and refuse to believe his protestations of innocence.

And the situation was just as compromising for the girl as for himself. He did not for a moment believe that she was in any way intentionally responsible for the infernal mistake. Probably she didn't even guess at the relationship which the hotel people attributed

to them. If she did get to hear of it she would be appalled.

What on earth was to be done? If he tried to explain to the management it would probably make matters worse; and if he now began to refer to Evelyn as "mademoiselle" it might expose her to insult and annoyance. What a tangle!

Self-interest told him that the obvious course was for him to leave Euzentern at once, and never return to it. But to that counsel he refused to listen. Inclination, moreover, not to speak of chivalry, reproached self-interest for even suggesting the possibility of leaving a nice girl to escape from her predicament alone. Of course he must stand by her until her uncle arrived. Equally of course, it was a deuced awkward situation for a respectable married man with a jealous and fiery-tempered wife.

The waiter brought in his breakfast, this time by the door opening out of the passage, muttered something unintelligible about "madame," and went out again.

When he had drunk his coffee and dressed, Denys collected his drawing materials and went downstairs and out into the sunlit street. There was really no reason why he should hang about for the girl upstairs—none whatever. He had come to Euzentern to sketch its church, whose towering spire was visible over the roofs of the houses, and there was nothing to prevent him from making a start. Still, if he went off by himself Evelyn might deem it unfriendly of him. She wouldn't know

his reason for avoiding her. She would remain in ignorance of the insane conclusion which the reception clerk and everybody else in the hotel had come to about her and himself.

Denys swore. He heaped maledictions on the Hotel Beffroi, on its proprietor, on every individual on its staff, on the hideous Flemish language which no civilised being could either speak or understand. Oh, the crass ignorance of these people! Nowhere else in the world could such an ill-starred imbroglio have occurred. No, he was damned if he'd turn tail! He'd face things out. The mischief was done anyhow. He might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

CHAPTER IX

HAVING reached this conclusion, Denys, who had not got more than a few steps from the front door, briskly re-entered the hotel and settled himself in the lounge in a position which enabled him to see everyone who passed in or out. The inquisitive Englishman who had " rubber-necked " Evelyn and himself at dinner on the previous evening was also in the lounge, reading the Continental *Daily Mail.* Denys was careful not to glance in his direction. He had no intention of allowing himself to be drawn into conversation.

At the end of ten minutes his patience was rewarded by the sight of Evelyn descending the staircase. She looked, he thought, in much better spirits this morning. If she had found out the mistake made by the hotel people, evidently it had not caused her any uneasiness. But Denys guessed, and rightly, that she was still in ignorance of it.

" Good-morning," he said. " I've been hoping you'd show me the lions of Euzentern if you've nothing better to do. Will you ? "

" Why, certainly. We'll begin by exploring the church."

They left the hotel, unaware that they did so under the intent gaze of the man with the newspaper.

The church of St. Bénoit turned out be even more remarkable than Denys had supposed. By dint of bribing an elderly sacristan they were enabled to examine many of its treasures not usually shown to visitors, including a magnificent set of embroidered vestments and an extremely beautiful gold chalice. There were also three pictures in the sacristy of the early Flemish school which he would have given much to have been able to remove and examine at his leisure. The church authorities appeared to attach no special importance to them, judging by their sad state of repair.

"It's astonishing how some of these out-of-the-way towns neglect their art treasures," he expostulated. "The sight of such works mouldering to decay in this God-forsaken place almost reconciles one to the activities of American millionaires. Far better that treasures like these should grace a distant art-gallery—even a private one—than that they should rot here, unappreciated and uncared for. Why even in Venice, in churches visited by thousands of tourists, there are scores of masterpieces perishing of neglect."

He mentioned the "Stations of the Cross" by Tiepolo, in the Friari, and was delighted to discover that Evelyn had heard of it.

"I was employed at an art dealer's in Bond Street before I went to live with Mrs. Maribon," she explained. "It was awfully interesting work. We

had some wonderful pictures through our hands. The man who ran it was an enthusiast. One couldn't help learning something from him. Unfortunately he had more knowledge and enthusiasm than business capacity, and the business went smash."

"Too honest, I suppose. The way to make money at picture-dealing is to buy fakes, represent them as coming from some famous collection, and pass them on to the new-rich at a price slightly less than a genuine original would fetch. Then the profiteers think they're getting a bargain and everybody's satisfied."

When he had made one or two quick sketches of parts of the interior and another of the front of the church, he suggested that they should revisit the Café de l'Univers.

"I'm afraid you must find it very boring watching me work," he said.

"Have I seemed bored? I'd give anything to be able to draw. It was quite a fascinating experience to watch someone who can."

Denys made little of his hour's work and put his drawing materials in his satchel. Then they strolled off along the winding street towards the Grande Place.

Already a feeling of sympathy and unconstraint existed between them. With feminine intuition Evelyn knew she could trust her new friend Denys didn't dissect his attitude towards her. It was summed up in the one word "admiration." He found her wholly satisfying.

CHAPTER X

THE day passed as quickly as only the first day of a dawning friendship can pass. They explored the picturesque little town in a leisurely fashion, rested and drank grenadine on the *terrasse* of the Café de l'Univers, and generally cemented a mutual regard.

The more Denys got to know of Evelyn, the more he liked and respected her. Above all, he admired her pluck under adverse circumstances.

"I've had to fend for myself ever since I was seventeen," she told him at dinner. "You would be amused if you knew all the different jobs I've had—and lost. One gets philosophical about things after a time. You see, my mother died when I was fifteen and my father two years later while I was still at school. He was on the Stock Exchange and the stoppage of business in 1914 practically ruined him, though he staved off actual bankruptcy. Unfortunately, he'd been living beyond his income for years, and when everything was settled up there wasn't a penny for me. The only blood relation I have is my aunt, Mrs. Cradeley, my mother's sister. Although she could hardly afford it, she gave

me a home after my father's death. It wasn't exactly pleasant there, on account of my uncle, so I started as soon as I could to look out for myself. It wasn't easy. I'd never been taught anything useful. I'd been to a good school and had never been given to understand that I might have to earn my living, so I really wasn't fitted for anything." She paused. "But I'm spoiling your appetite."

In order to listen the better Denys had involuntarily stopped eating. Hurriedly making use of his knife and fork again, he said:

"Not at all. You interest me."

"Then I'll go on. First I managed to get a place as a nursery governess with a family at Bournemouth. I had to leave there after a few months, because the husband became--well, too amorous. Oh, it was quite a commonplace affair. I imagine that sort of thing often happens. But I was only a schoolgirl and I was scared to death and hit him in the face -rather hard. Of course I left next day. What I couldn't understand was the unreasoning fury of his wife. She blamed me, not him. She couldn't have treated me worse if I had actually encouraged him."

"That's understandable. A woman's anger against another—a younger and more attractive one—for being contemptuous of her husband." Denys' tone was sardonic. "It rankles so much that she loses her sense of proportion."

The philosophic comment was all he thought it

advisable to allow himself. He raged inwardly at the indignities she had suffered. He put himself back in her past and was her champion.

"I wish . . . "

He stopped there. Passion was in his voice.

It was evident to Evelyn that she had stirred his feelings. His sympathy gladdened her. But as she was not intentionally trying to stir it up, she resumed in a more airy tone :

"It was a hard knock, but I didn't let it distress me. After the Bournemouth episode I got a post as teacher in a girls' school, an 'academy for the daughters of gentlemen only.' You can imagine how second-rate is must have been from the fact that they employed me. My only academic distinction was a Higher Certificate, with honours in history ; no teaching experience whatever. It didn't take long to discover that I wasn't intended by nature for a school-marm ! Ugh ! All I can say is that if those little demons were the daughters of gentlemen, I'd far rather have had to do with the daughters of dustmen !"

"How long did you stay ?"

"Two terms. I couldn't stick it longer than that."

"And then ?"

"There was nothing else for it but to go back to my aunt's. She wasn't overjoyed to see me, so I made up my mind to try the stage for a living, and I pestered my uncle to get me into the chorus. Of course I had romantic dreams of being selected to play the principal

part when the leading lady was suddenly taken ill. You know—the kind of thing that always happens in novels. And of course, with becoming modesty, I also felt certain that I had only to be seen by a cinema magnate to be offered an engagement at once. My aunt was outraged by the suggestion. Wouldn't hear of it, and so on. She heard too much of stage life from Uncle Bob to approve of it as a profession for girls. But as her only alternative was to go on supporting me, she eventually swallowed her scruples, and my uncle got me a chorus engagement in an inconspicuous touring revue."

"Did you like it?"

"No, I can't say I did. We went to places like Tonypandy and Burslem and Hartlepool and Wigan. It wasn't exactly an edifying life, but it had its humorous side. Some of the girls were quite good sorts, otherwise it wouldn't have been bearable. But those theatrical lodgings! As long as I live I don't think I shall ever forget them!"

Denys nodded comprehension. He had heard about life on tour from his wife, who had left the stage to marry him.

"After that I lived with the Cradeleys again for a while and earned a little by reading the *Times* every morning to an old gentleman who was nearly blind. So was I after a month of it! He liked sitting in a subdued light with the blinds down, which made reading small print rather trying. Still, good came of it. It

was he who gave me an introduction to the art dealer. And from the art dealer I went to live with Mrs. Maribon. . . . And here I am. Now you have my whole history up to date."

Denys had listened to this "real-life story" with mingled emotions. Evelyn's description of her experiences had been narrated without the least attempt to excite pity, indeed with considerable humorous resignation, as if such things were only what one ought to expect if one had neglected to provide oneself with a financially solvent father.

"And now what are you going to do?" he asked anxiously, aware almost as soon as he had voiced it of the futility of the question.

"Begin where I left off. Look out for another job—a soft one if I can get it."

He did not depress her by making the obvious retort that soft jobs were not easy to find. He could not, however, conceal from himself the fact that her prospects were anything but rosy. So many dangers confronted a girl who had little more than charm and good looks to recommend her. For once, in a way, he wished she were less lovely.

"I wish I could help," he said. "You must let me keep in touch with you. I may hear of something."

"I shall be glad if you will. It's awfully kind of you to take so much interest in a casual acquaintance."

"All acquaintances begin by being casual. I don't like to think of ours under that designation."

" Is there one that fits it better ? "

" Yes. To me it was a happy chance."

" And to me, as well."

Soon after dinner Evelyn pleaded a headache and went to bed. Left to himself Denys rambled about the moonlit streets. It was useless to try and keep his thoughts from dwelling on his sweet companion and he did not make the attempt. She was, after all, a delightful creature to think about. Less agreeable was the thought of his Hampstead home and the wife who awaited his return. He tried to shake it off but could not.

CHAPTER XI

THE man who had taken such undisguised interest in Denys and Evelyn was one of those with whom curiosity about other people's affairs is a consuming passion. He did not merely "wonder"; whenever he got a chance he took steps to find out.

To begin with he decided that this English couple did not seem to him to have a "married look." The man was too interested and attentive to be the lady's husband. They *might* be recently married, of course. Yet the fact that the man had turned up two days later than the girl was suspicious. It looked like an assignation.

Mr. Charles Milward was amused. The demeanour of the "temporarily married" man and his "certified bride" in Continental hotels always diverted him.

When, on the morning of Denys' arrival, he and Evelyn had left the hotel in company, Milward prevailed upon the reception clerk to let him examine the hotel register. He had been often enough in Belgium for his ear to have become accustomed to the *patois,* and was able to make himself understood in it.

The register showed him that whatever the lady's name might be (the entry was smudged and almost illegible) it was certainly not "Stoughton." He chuckled with amusement, and asked the clerk if she knew what Mr. Stoughton's profession was. Yes, she remembered perfectly well. It was entered on the official form as "*artiste-peintre.*" A painter! That of course accounted for the drawing-block, which Milward had noticed Stoughton take out of his satchel.

Satisfied with his information he strolled off to the café for his morning Vermouth. Now, where had he heard before of a painter named Stoughton? It sounded familiar. For half an hour the fact for which he was searching his mind eluded him, but at last, in a flash, came remembrance. Joyce Maudslay had left the stage to marry a painter of that name. This must be the very man!

Milward sat back in his chair and pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Years ago when on tour with little Joyce he had been very gone on her. He had always wondered whether he would ever meet her again. And here was her husband enjoying an unofficial honeymoon in an out-of-the-way Belgian town with another woman! It was an odd coincidence.

Milward, an actor, in the condition of what is euphemistically termed "resting," had plenty of time to tickle his easily-stirred sensual emotions with thoughts of "little Joyce." As his next engagement did not begin until September, he had come to Belgium

partly for a holiday, partly in order to economise, and incidentally to put sundry of his creditors off the scent. He had been bored—how bored! But this tit-bit of fortuitous scandal made up for much. On his return to London he would at least have an amusing story to take back with him. It would tickle the ears of many a professional friend who had known Joyce. If he had left Euzentern two days ago, as he had intended, he would have missed it.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Evelyn woke up on the following morning her first anxiety was to discover whether there was a letter for her from her aunt or uncle. She rang for her breakfast, but when it came there was, much to her disappointment, no letter on the tray. While she was dressing, a chambermaid, who spoke a little intelligible French, came in with her hot water; Evelyn took the opportunity of asking her to go down and make certain that no letter had arrived. The maid went on her errand and returned shaking her head. There was nothing for madame, but there was a letter for "*monsieur votre mari!*"

Evelyn stared at her in astonishment, which changed to consternation as she apprehended all that was implied by those three casual words "*Monsieur votre mari*" stood for Denys Stoughton! The maid left the room without noticing the embarrassment her chance remark had caused.

As soon as the door closed Evelyn subsided weakly into a chair. Her heart sank. Her nerve left her. On top of all her other troubles and anxieties

this further one was the last straw. To think of it! For two nights she had slept in a room communicating with that of a man whom the hotel servants regarded as her husband, separated from him only by a door the key of which was not even on her side!

Her face blanched as full realisation of the compromising situation in which she was placed came home to her. She wondered whether Stoughton had also discovered that he was supposed to be her husband. And then came the horrible thought that he might have encouraged the hotel people in their error.

But she dismissed that suspicion almost as soon as it was formed. Would not the position be as compromising for him as it was for herself, and as intolerable? Besides, he wasn't capable of such baseness. Suppose his wife got to hear of it? She might use it as grounds for bringing an action for divorce and citing her, Evelyn, as co-respondent! The evidence would be considered conclusive in an English court. No one would believe that she and Denys were the innocent victims of a misconception.

In her agitation of mind, Evelyn could not bear the thought of meeting Denys. She could not possibly discuss the situation with him. It would be too humiliating.

She managed to slip out of the hotel without being observed, but she could not avoid meeting him at lunch. During the meal she noticed a look of rather puzzled enquiry in his face, but she resolutely refused

to allow the conversation to take an intimate turn. She kept up a rapid flow of talk: about Euzentern, about her experiences with Mrs. Maribon, about the merits and demerits of the Charleston, and other equally commonplace subjects. The atmosphere of constraint which underlay her bright chatter was apparent enough to Denys. He couldn't account for it.

After luncheon she again disappeared and he passed an afternoon of unadulterated gloom. Was she purposely avoiding him? Was it possible—the thought and a fear with it came on him abruptly—that she had discovered what the hotel were assuming and that she blamed him for being the cause of it?

After dinner, which for both of them was as strained and uncomfortable a meal as luncheon had been, he decided to have it out with her.

"Shall we go and have our coffee at the *Univers*?" he asked.

She returned his enquiring look with one of hesitation and embarrassment

"I don't think I—I shall go out again to-night," she said unsteadily.

"Please," he insisted. "There's something I particularly want to talk to you about. Of course I can say it here, if you prefer, but I'd rather do so outside the hotel."

Evelyn dropped her eyes. "Very well," she said after a thoughtful pause.

She went upstairs, ostensibly to get her hand-bag. In reality what she wanted to do was to gain time to think. Denys obviously intended to thresh out the dreadful supposition which the hotel people had arrived at. She had seen it in his face. How would he put it? What would he do about it? She was no prude, but she quailed at the prospect of having to discuss such a delicate subject with a man, no matter how much she liked him. A glance at herself in the glass showed how pale she was. For once in a way she thought it advisable to apply a little artificial colour to her cheeks.

Speech was beyond either of them until they were face to face again at their usual table on the *terrasse* of the café. Even then Denys had to muster up all his courage to tackle the problem before him.

"You've got something on your mind," he began. "I think I can guess what it is. You've found out what the hotel people are thinking about us. Am I right?"

"Fearfully right." Her face was on fire. "This morning the chambermaid in speaking to me used the expression '*Monsieur votre mari*,' meaning you, of course, and I was too utterly taken aback to contradict her. It's simply dreadful! I can't bear it!" Her shoe was tapping the floor in agitation. "If I don't hear from my people to-morrow I don't know what I shall do. I can't possibly stay on in that hateful hotel."

"I'm dreadfully sorry. It's a ridiculous but deplorable mistake for them to have fallen into. Unfortunately the mischief can't be remedied by my clearing out, or I would do so at once, if only on your account. But how can I possibly leave you to face such a disagreeable situation alone?"

"No, please don't go on my account. I'm used to looking after myself." She tried to keep desperation out of her voice.

Denys wanted to say: "If there's no letter, won't you let me take you back to London?" But he saw that in her present mood she wouldn't listen to that. He contented himself by begging her not to worry.

"Of course I'll see you through, whatever happens," he assured her. "So make your mind easy."

"Thank you, Mr. Stoughton. But I'm sure it won't be necessary. My uncle may already be on his way."

For half an hour they talked round the situation, lapsing every now and then into awkward silences.

On their return to the hotel Evelyn shyly held out her hand.

"Good-night. You mustn't think me ungrateful. I shall never forget how kind you've been."

She turned away before he could reply, leaving him standing motionless in the moonlit street.

"Awkward how this girl is beginning to disturb my peace of mind," he thought, as he started off, hoping that a walk would relieve some of his *malaise.*

CHAPTER XIII

WITH a match in his hand wherewith to light his first matutinal cigarette, Denys paused to listen. There was no mistaking the nature of the sounds that came from the adjoining bedroom – a suppressed sound of weeping. Hadn't he heard them once before? Evidently Evelyn's overwrought nerves had given way.

"Bad news through the post," he said to himself.

Without pausing to think, he slipped on a dressing-gown and knocked at the communicating door.

"Miss Stanton," he called. "Miss Stanton."

The sobs abruptly ceased.

"Yes?" The reply was barely audible.

"I'll count twenty and then come in."

"Oh, don't! *Please* don't!"

"One–two—three—four—five—six——"

While he slowly counted he could hear the fluttering of draperies. She was hurriedly making herself presentable.

"Twenty!"

He opened the door. Evelyn, with a wrapper over

her nightgown, was sitting at the dressing-table with her back to him, trying unsuccessfully to remove the traces of her tears. Lying open beside her was a letter and alongside it three English treasury notes.

"Now look here, niece," he began. "As a conscientious uncle I insist on being told all about it. I can't stand by and hear you crying your eyes out when probably all your troubles could be straightened out by a little mutual confidence. Won't you be frank with me ? "

She did not turn her head, only continued to sit shrinking over the dressing-table, a picture of dejection.

" Is your uncle coming over to fetch you ? "

She shook her head.

"Forgive me"—he laid a hand lightly on her shoulder—" but have your people sent you enough money to enable you to pay your bill here and your fare home ? "

Again she shook her head. Denys could see that she was making a tremendous effort at self-mastery.

" I guess they haven't then. In that case it's quite obvious that you must let me be your banker."

" But I can't," she faltered. " I don't know when or how I could ever pay you back. It's awfully good of you, but really you mustn't. . . ."

" Then what are you going to do ? "

She remained miserably silent.

" Very well, I'm going to decide for you. You can't stay on here indefinitely. That's clear. So

I simply decline to depart and leave you in the lurch. If *you* stay, *I* stay. And as I'm dead sick of Euzentern and want to spend a day or two in Ostend before returning to London, it would only be ordinary kindness on your part to accompany me. Now, are we agreed on that point ? If so I'll go and settle with the female ghoul downstairs."

Seeing that he was in earnest she began stammering :

"Please make what excuses you can for me. Frankly, I'm not in a position to refuse. And it's only fair I should do whatever you suggest after all your kindness, Mr. Stoughton. But first I want to let you know exactly how I'm situated. If you'll glance through my aunt's letter you'll see why I was upset."

She picked it up and handed it to him.

It was the letter of a harassed woman, with more trouble on her hands than she could cope with. Two pages were filled with her financial worries ; a third was devoted to giving cogent reasons why she could not offer her niece a home ; and a fourth was filled with expressions of friendliness and regret that three pounds was the utmost she could scrape together. She concluded by saying how sorry she was that owing to pressure of business her husband was not able to get across to Euzentern, and that she felt sure her niece would be able to "manage all right." In an abrupt line at the end she sent her love.

Denys put the letter down. Somehow or other he couldn't help having a suspicion that it had been

written under compulsion—at the instigation of Mr. Robert Cradeley, no doubt.

"Now you see exactly what my prospects are of being able to repay you," Evelyn continued lamentably. "I've nowhere to go when I get to London, and I don't know how I'm going to earn a living when I get there. I feel it's a shame to take advantage of your good nature. It's not as though I had a claim on you."

"It's not a question of a claim, dear child, merely one of convenience to yourself and pleasure to me. Think for a moment. If no one ever took help from another in a difficulty except on a 'claim,' this earth, believe me, would be a damned uncomfortable place to live in. I certainly don't know how I should have managed myself if I hadn't been helped out of holes time and again by people on whom I had no claim. So don't give that side of it another thought. I'll go downstairs as soon as I'm dressed to settle our bills. And if you want to reward me you'll do so by getting dressed and packed and putting all your troubles away without more ado. If you'll only say yes to that I promise you shall have no more worries till you're back in London."

Evelyn's tear-stained face made a heroic attempt at a smile.

"You *are* a brick," she said.

"Not a bit. A thoroughly selfish man who wants the company for a few days of a charming niece. I have five more days left before I need return to London,

and five days of sea air and sea bathing are just exactly what you require to buck you up after all you've been through. I prescribe it as a physician—amateur, but gifted. Do you obey, niece?"

"Very well—uncle." Evelyn had no need now to summon a smile to her pretty lips. It came there spontaneously. "In half an hour I'll be packed and ready."

CHAPTER XIV

"THANK the Lord that's the last of Euzentern!"

Denys heaved a sigh of relief as the train for Ostend drew slowly out of the station. He leaned back against the red velvet cushions of the railway carriage and with smiling eyes looked across at Evelyn. Joy at having escaped from the Hotel Beffroi was even more marked in her face. It now bore not a trace of depression, but every sign of relief and pleasurable anticipation. Holidays had been so rare in her life hitherto that the coming one and the freedom from care that accompanied it inspirited her enormously.

When they reached Ostend, Denys drove to one of the most comfortable of the smaller hotels and made it clear to the management that their relationship was that of uncle and niece.

The town, which seems to rise so abruptly out of the sea and to have nothing at the back of it, was crowded with English and American tourists. Its *plage* was, to Denys, rather distressingly like Blackpool or Cromer.

But Evelyn was far too excited to be hypercritical; she enjoyed all the bustle and movement on the *digue*;

revelled in the delicious chocolates which Denys bought for her at Mary's in the rue de Flandre ; took in deep draughts of strong sea air at the end of the Estacade, and bathed morning and afternoon.

After their first dinner they went into the gaudy rococo Casino where Denys initiated her into the mysteries of roulette, and for the first time in her life she listened to the thrilling words: "*Messieurs, faites vos jeux. Les jeux sont faits. Rien ne va plus.*"

She hazarded a few francs, and after an hour's play under Denys' direction got up from the table the richer by a couple of hundred. Denys couldn't help being amused at her amazement at what she deemed an uncommonly easy way of making money.

"If you take my advice you'll change it into a good English treasury note and play only with your original stake next time."

Evelyn laughed gaily.

"Sensible uncle, I'll do as you suggest. I know if I followed my own inclinations I should probably risk all I have on one *coup* and lose it. I didn't believe before all that I'd heard about gambling. It really is exciting."

They walked slowly round the tables watching a singularly commonplace crowd of tourists risking unimportant sums with the terrible earnestness and anxiety of unaccustomed players. For Evelyn, the whole scene had a romantic glamour shed over it by inexperience and a vivid imagination. Denys derived his enjoyment principally from observing hers.

The rooms were overpoweringly hot and they were glad to get out again into the cool night air.

"Let's go right to the end of the Estacade," Evelyn suggested.

As they walked down the long jetty, the velvety darkness of the night seemed to close in on them and enfold them. When they reached the end Evelyn stood for a long time in silence gazing over the placid sea.

What fate lay in store for her on the other side of those empty waters? She gave a slight shiver of apprehension. Denys, noticing it, laid a hand lightly on one of hers and asked if she felt cold.

Not without difficulty did he keep tenderness out of his voice. Her proximity and their isolation in the breathless summer night made it very hard for him to keep his head. All his senses urged him to take this girl into his arms, draw her slim body to his and cover her face with kisses; but all his better instincts were equally peremptory in commanding him to do nothing of the sort. He had no intention of spoiling her enjoyment of her holiday or of forfeiting her confidence. He knew he had gained that. A silent voice within him cried;

"Ah, if only things were different!"

"Don't you feel homesick?" Her question brought him to himself.

"No. Why?"

"Looking out to the West—America."

"Not particularly. I don't feel able to project myself so far—to-night. Anyway, it's a good while since I was there."

"Where the winds all come from. And the Gulf Stream—unless my geography's rusty."

"I'm not sure about the Gulf Stream," he debated. "It's generally in working order on this side, I believe. Entirely British in fact—mild, warm and constant. I forget what it's like on the other side of the Atlantic. Anyway, I never noticed it. I expect it conforms to the twelve-mile limit. At least it probably has during the last few administrations. Too moist for the Prohibitionists, perhaps."

"Was it prohibition that brought you to Europe?"

He laughed. "No, I came to study art."

"Are you ever going back?"

"Maybe, some day. . . . I'm very satisfied here."

"You mean in England?"

"And in Ostend. Especially in Ostend." After a pause he said: "When we leave Ostend I shall probably lose you."

She seemed to disregard that remark. In a changed tone she said:

"Tell me about your wife."

The question took him aback. He had to rearrange his thoughts before he was able to reply.

"There's very little to tell. . . . It would hardly interest you. . . . At least, I'm afraid I couldn't make the subject attractive. Matrimony seldom is."

" Poor Denys ! "

The brief comment shook him.

Rather suddenly she switched on to another topic.

" I was just feeling as if I were standing on the brink of a river and about to take the plunge," she said, with a dreary little laugh. " Over there, miles away across the darkness, lies England—and uncertainty. I'm afraid she won't have much of a welcome to give me."

" Come now, that won't do," he chided. " What did my niece promise me ? That during these next few days she wouldn't worry about the future or even think about it. That's not keeping a promise ! "

" I'm sorry." Evelyn spoke humbly. " It was only a momentary aberration, because I happened to be staring straight at England ! "

" Turn your head then, and look at the glitter of Ostend by night. It's wonderful, isn't it ? An island of light in an ocean of darkness. Let's get back to it and eat an ice to lively music. And what about a dance ? Do you feel inclined, Evelyn ? "

" Lovely ! I haven't danced for ages. I warn you, though, I'm not much good at the Charleston yet. You'll have to put up with that."

She did not appear to notice that he had called her for the first time by her christian name. Denys himself was scarcely conscious of it ; it had come so naturally to his lips.

They stopped at one of the large cafês on the sea-front with " Dancing " attached to it, where a number

of couples—the men mostly in flannels and the girls in equally informal attire—were gyrating to the strains of "Jimmy's Charleston Band." At least that was the name painted in black letters on the illuminated big drum.

Stoughton, like most of his compatriots, danced admirably and was soon able to initiate his partner into the complexities of the Charleston. Evelyn had a natural and felicitous sense of movement and only needed practice. Of all the lesser pleasures of life dancing was the one she most enjoyed, and she had not danced long with Denys before she realised that he was the partner of her dreams. He knew exactly how to hold her, was never undecided, managed to let her know what he was going to do a second or two before he did it, and had such a feeling for the rhythm of the music that it seemed to flow through all his body into hers.

For both of them the hours went at astonishing speed, so much so that when, at one o'clock in the morning, the jaded musicians put away their instruments, Evelyn pouted with disappointment.

"Oh dear, they're going!" she cried. "What a pity! I feel I could dance all night!"

There was a fire in her eyes which Denys had never seen in them before; her face was transfigured with happiness. He would have been glad enough to take her on to some night cabaret where restricted hours were not *de rigeur*, but a feeling of responsibility restrained

him. He did not know Ostend particularly well, and was disinclined to risk bringing her into contact with the less desirable side of a Continental watering-place. Reluctantly, therefore, they turned their steps towards their hotel.

"This has been an extraordinary day for me, Denys," she said, as she parted from him in the corridor outside her room. "I don't think I've been so miserable in my life as I was early this morning, and yet I haven't often enjoyed myself as much as I have thit evening. You're certainly a remarkably efficiens uncle!"

"And you are the most inspiring of nieces. Sleep well, my dear. To-morrow we'll try what the floor's like in the Casino."

Once again she noticed how shy and kind his eyes were, and she fell asleep warmed by the conviction that she, who so needed a friend, had found a real one at last.

CHAPTER XV

UNTIL the end of their stay Ostend surpassed itself. Sky and sea were as blue as they looked in any railway poster, the sands as golden. Evelyn enjoyed herself as only a girl can who has hitherto been deprived of her fair share of the pleasures of life.

After their morning bathe they frequently explored the older streets on the outskirts of the town, where little of the cosmopolitanism of the *digue* was observable. There, also, they often discovered unpretentious restaurants where an astonishingly good and cheap *déjeuner* was provided. They danced at tea-time and after dinner; went for long walks over the sand dunes; watched the packet-boats arrive and depart; looked at the crowds in the cafés; ate ices and drank peculiarly delicious iced-lager; did a little mild gambling at the roulette tables (where Evelyn's luck still continued); and very quickly became so intimate that it seemed hardly possible that they had known each other for less than a week.

When at last the day came for Denys to return and once more take up the routine of his London existence,

he felt, as he walked the deck of the Channel boat with Evelyn by his side, that æons had elapsed since he had left home.

"I never thought I could like Ostend so much," he said with a whimsical smile, as he bent over the rail and looked at the receding town.

"It has been simply heavenly," she rejoined. "I've never had such a good time before." She waved a handkerchief in response to similar salutes from the diminutive figures at the end of the Estacade, watching the departing steamer.

"Now the embargo is withdrawn, isn't it?" she enquired.

"Meaning?"

"That I may discuss the future, and allow myself to think about it."

"Yes, I suppose we'd better put our heads together and think what's best to be done. First of all there's the question of finding you somewhere to stay. I know of a boarding-house in South Kensington that ought to suit you. It's cheap, clean and fairly comfortable. I'll write the address down for you. It's not likely to be full. Then there's the question of a job."

"There is, indeed. A question complicated by the fact that my well-meaning father was too old-fashioned to realise that one day I might have to work for my living and so never had me taught anything useful. My education was purely ornamental and not very good at that. I have the usual elementary

knowledge of French ; I can play the piano moderately well ; sing tolerably ; play tennis, golf, hockey—and that's about all. I'm interested in painting and not entirely ignorant. But I'm a long way from being an expert in anything. The little that I know won't be of any help in getting another situation of the kind I've just lost."

"I'm not so sure." Denys spoke hopefully. "I know a good many picture-dealers. I'll give you letters to them and I'll keep my ears open at the same time. You'll find something, never fear."

"I don't think I do often *fear*. The nearest I've come yet to cowardice and despair was at Euzentern. You caught me at my weakest moment, Denys dear. I was like a swimmer out of her depth when you came to my rescue. It isn't any use blinking the facts. The outstanding one is that I cannot and will not abuse your generosity. You see"—colour flooded her cheeks —"it might be rather difficult for you, might it not? I mean your motives might be misunderstood . . . . Married men can't very well come to the rescue of maidens in distress without letting themselves in for a lot of—complications. I must think of it from your point of view. You've helped me already far more than I had any right to expect or to let you. You mustn't worry about me after I leave you at Victoria. I think I can always, as a last resource, force my uncle to get me into the chorus of a revue. That's a living, anyway. And then I've got certain ideas about marriage which I

suppose would have been considered very shocking a generation ago."

Denys turned enquiring and rather startled eyes.

"I was educated on the assumption that marriage would be my natural fate," she proceeded. "It's the only business I was trained for. Well, I regard it *as* a business. Naturally, I don't want to marry unless I meet a man I can love. But I'm not in a position to consult my wants. If I have the luck to come across a decent man who offers me marriage I shall probably accept him ; and if I do, even if I can't give him love, I shall at least try to be a good wife. I mean——"

She broke off abruptly and looked at Denys, who looked back at her with troubled eyes.

"The essence of marriage seems to me to be in the nature of partnership," she went on. "I'm determined, if I enter into it, not to let my partner down. It's a contract. My husband gives me a roof, cares for me, looks after me, and in return I make him a home, study his interests, help him, give him children if he wants them, and try to make him happy. It isn't romantic. But I can't afford romance. It's not dishonourable, though, is it ? What I don't intend to do is to take all I can get and give nothing in return."

During this harangue Denys looked as dejected as he felt.

"It sounds reasonable, I admit," he said. "All the same, there's a catch in it."

"A catch ! Where ? "

He gazed disconsolately at the green waters of the Channel, through which the boat's powerful turbines were driving her at high speed. In less than a couple of hours the cliffs of Dover would be in sight. He was convinced they wouldn't be a welcome one.

"A girl like you won't be able to live without love," he blurted out after a longish pause. "If you accept the first man who asks you, fate will inevitably take its revenge. You'd be wiser, I think, to wait for the prompting of your heart. Love, when it does come, has a way of carrying everything before it. Until you realise that . . ."

"Dear Denys!" A glow of tenderness came into her soft eyes. "I wonder if you know that you are sometimes as naïve as a young girl, or realise that in some ways I'm quite as experienced as any man of the world! Have you ever reflected on what the alternatives are which confront a penniless girl of the middle-class who is without training either for business life or a profession? Think it over. She may become some kind of domestic servant if she's got the necessary courage and endurance. She may, if she's very lucky and adaptable, get taken on in a superior shop. And she can't count on luck. For every such post there are always at least a hundred applicants. Or she may, if she's not unattractive, exist on male bounty, for which in one form or another she will have to give something in return. Of the three alternatives the last, I regret to say, is the easiest and sometimes the

most attractive. But as I happen to have rather fastidious tastes I can only make the kind of payment which is consistent with my idea of self-respect. You see, I'm not under any illusion. Illusions, I'm inclined to think, died a natural death in nineteen-fourteen or thereabouts. So if you can't find me a job—which I should like more than anything—find me a nice young man who is 'earning good money,' as the servant girls say, and who will fall a victim to my charms. If you can do that I shall be eternally grateful."

Although she spoke in a tone of light raillery and seemed in the best of spirits, Denys found himself unable to respond to her mood. On the contrary, a deep depression overcame him for which he could not satisfactorily account to himself.

After all, why should it matter to him if Evelyn contracted a loveless marriage? Tens of thousands of girls did so every day, and no one could pretend that, on the average, such marriages were less successful than those in which passion on both sides was strong. His own marriage had been a typical "love-match," and yet he could not pretend to himself that it had proved anything but a dismal failure.

"Why so gloomy, Denys?"

"I was just thinking."

"That's what you told me I wasn't to do."

"Yes, I suppose it *is* a bad habit," he confessed, with a rather shamefaced laugh. "'Think no more. 'Tis only thinking lays lads underground.' Neither of

us wants to be laid underground yet awhile, I trust."

"Not I, certainly, while the world is so full of attractive young men, not to mention the even more attractive middle-aged ones."

There was impish roguery in her voice.

"You can't deceive *me* with all that talk," he said, "I know you too well. Hullo, here is perfidious Albion looming through the haze! We shall be on shore and in the train in less than an hour."

They watched the white cliffs as they grew more and more defined with the minutes. Presently Evelyn said:

"The sight of my native shore makes me feel quite emotional. Do you know, this is the first time I've ever been out of England—the first time I've ever approached it from the sea? Curious that it should take a sea voyage to make one realise that one's country is an island. I suppose it accounts for the insularity of the Briton!"

Denys was accurate in his estimate of the time it would take them to make Dover. Within an hour, thanks to the celerity of a porter in getting their baggage into the train, they were seated opposite one another in a Pullman car.

"I'm going to ask you to do me a favour," he said with some signs of nervousness. "It's this: I want you to let me lend you a little money to go on with. Be a good girl, close your eyes, and open your bag."

"Oh, Denys! I shall feel wretched if I take any more from you."

"That's where the favour comes in. If you'll only regard me as a disinterested friend – a *real* friend —you won't feel wretched at all. What are friends for if they can't stand by one another in a crisis? Surely that's a good enough maxim to hold to! With a stranger, or someone one doesn't trust or like, of course it's a different thing altogether."

Evelyn gave him a nod. She could hardly trust herself to speak. Obediently she closed her eyes. Denys opened her handbag and slipped a ten-pound note into it.

"That will tide you over a week or two," he said; "long before that I prophesy something will have turned up in the way of a pleasant occupation for you. You'll see."

Eloquent gratitude shone in Evelyn's eyes. The train began to glide out of the station and a minute or two later the car attendant appeared with tea.

"Oh, how good it tastes!" Evelyn exclaimed. "Tea is almost the only thing I've really missed while I've been away."

The short journey to Victoria passed all too quickly. They found a hundred things to talk about; made vague plans for the future. And all the time a warning voice told Denys that if he wanted to see any more of this entrancing girl he would have to employ great discretion, to say the least of it.

That thought came to him with violent force when the train drew in at Victoria. For there on the platform, scanning the carriages with peevish intentness, was his wife. He withdrew hastily from the window before she saw him. He had completely forgotten that he had written from Ostend telling her of the time of his arrival. He cursed himself for having given her that unnecessary information.

"Listen a moment, Evelyn," he said, as he lifted her suitcase from the rack. "I'm afraid I shall have to put you straight into a taxi and pack you off. I've just seen my wife. She's on the platform and I haven't time to explain. Do you mind?"

She paled slightly. The implication was clear enough. Mrs. Stoughton was a jealous woman, possibly a vengeful one, and he wished to avoid an encounter between them. Luckily for herself Evelyn was not labouring under any sense of wrong-doing.

"Oh, that's all right," she declared with forced ease. "I'll get along and wait for you at the other end of the platform."

She picked up her suitcase and disappeared into the throng surrounding the Customs barrier.

Her quick-witted action won Denys' admiration. He also merged himself in the crowd. It now only remained to escape his wife's observation while his luggage was being cleared.

He thought he had succeeded in this when, twenty minutes later, he rejoined Evelyn close to the long

line of waiting taxis. Quickly securing one, he helped her into it and gave the driver her address. There was no time for anything but a pressure of her hand and the assurance that he would find means to see her again shortly.

"Goodbye, Denys dear," she murmured. "And thank you again and again for all your goodness."

As bad luck would have it those few seconds of delay enabled Joyce to catch sight of her husband. When he turned to look for her after the cab had driven away, he found her close at hand, and at once knew from the expression on her face that she had seen Evelyn.

"Hullo, Joyce," he cried with assumed cheeriness. "Nice of you to come and meet me. You're looking very well. Here's a taxi. Come along."

Grimly she followed him to the cab.

"I needn't ask if you've had a good time," she said acidly. "It was sufficiently obvious! May one enquire who the woman is?"

PART II

Part Two

CHAPTER I

EVELYN thought her driver had made some mistake when he brought his taxi to a stop. From what Denys had said of the Harrington Gardens *pension* she had visualised it as one of the usual rather dowdy-looking boarding-houses that abound in all the minor residential districts of London. Instead, facing her was a building of superior dimensions and immaculate appearance. Through wide-open glass doors she could see right into its foyer, one not much inferior to that of a good-class hotel.

"Are you sure this is 'Highfield'?" she enquired of the cabman.

"That's right, miss. Highfield Private Hotel. Name's over the entrance."

She had no time to verify the statement. A smart porter emerged and took possession of her suitcase.

"This way, madam. If you'll take a seat I'll notify the manageress of your arrival."

Consternation descended on Evelyn. She would never be able to afford a superior place like this! The foyer was excellently furnished; the floor was par-

quetted; the white panelled walls glistened. Residents of the place sat about in comfortable-looking easy chairs or at well-equipped writing-tables. They all looked prosperous. One, a smartly-dressed girl, was sauntering about smoking a cigarette in a long tortoiseshell holder.

And Denys had given her to understand that "Highfield" was a cheap place! He must have made a mistake. In apprehension she half rose from her seat half-inclined to make a quick departure before the manageress turned up.

"I see you've just come from Ostend." The girl with the cigarette was the speaker. "At least, that's the sleuth deduction I make from the label on your suitcase. Jolly place, Ostend. That is, when you're in funds. I managed it the summer before last on the strength of a win at Kempton at the gorgeous price of thirty-three to one. Going to stay here?"

"I—I don't know," was Evelyn's hesitating response. "I'm not sure whether I can afford it. I came because it was recommended to me by a friend, but"—she looked about her in dismay—"his description of it doesn't tally with all this. He told me it was a boarding-house—a cheap one."

The smart girl whistled softly.

"I see how it is! He must have known it before it changed hands. It *is* a boarding-house of course, in a way. All private hotels are. They're not exorbitant here, though. They'll put you up for three guineas a

week. That is, if you're a worker. Mrs. Parker, the manageress, is always ready to temper the wind to the shorn lamb," she added with a laugh. "Small room—sort of cubicle, you know—at the top of the house."

Evelyn's fears diminished.

"Thanks awfully for telling me. I might run to three guineas. For a week or two, that is."

"Don't run away with the idea that you'll be fed on foie gras and ortolans. I haven't the remotest idea what ortolans are, except that they're expensive. Only made use of the word as an illustration. But the tucker isn't bad. Plain and wholesome, don't you know. Here's Mrs. Parker."

She gave a good-natured nod and sauntered off.

A couple of minutes sufficed with the manageress. In accordance with the smart girl's tip, Evelyn was frank with her and the manageress equally frank in return. She didn't usually take anybody under three-and-a-half guineas, but as that "naughty puss" Miss Iris Brown had evidently given her away (here she turned to shake an admonitory finger at that young lady, who responded with a flash of white teeth and an amazingly wide smile), she wouldn't disappoint Miss Stanton.

"Dinner's at seven-thirty," she said. "You'll just have time for a wash and brush up. I'll have a place reserved for you at Miss Brown's table."

CHAPTER II

In her very small but quite adequate bedroom under the eaves Evelyn felt a return of confidence. Three guineas a week was more than she had meant to pay, but she found a lot of compensation in the geniality of Mrs. Parker and the friendliness of Miss Brown. She was glad to know that she was going to share the latter's table. The boom of the gong reverberated as she changed into her black marocain frock.

Dinner was on the point of beginning when she got downstairs. She stood in the doorway scanning the well-filled dining-room in search of the table she was to share. From one of its further corners a brilliantly manicured hand was raised in signal. In and out among diners went Evelyn with Miss Brown's smooth Eton crop and vermilion lips as beacon.

"Glad you wangled it," was the greeting she got.

"Thanks to you."

"*Pas de quoi*, as they say in France. It wasn't all pure unselfishness. Thought you were a likely sort directly I spotted you. That's a posh dress you're wearing."

"I got it in Brussels. Mrs. Parker told me your name. Mine's Evelyn Stanton."

"We'll say Eve for short. Can't abbreviate Iris. Well, now we——"

"Take soup, vermicelli?" interrupted the Swiss waiter.

"We will, Adolf."

"Tanks." The plates were dumped before them.

"Have a good crossing?"

"Yes, it was quite smooth."

"Then you ought to have a fair appetite." Iris was probing her plate with her spoon. "I *say*, the cook must have stood a good way off when she aimed the vermicelli at this soup! Look at the old boy on your right, fishing for it. Anglo-Indian Colonel. Hullo, he's got a bite!"

"What sort of people are they here?" Evelyn enquired.

"Oh, assorted. New Poor mainly. Mostly middle-aged, as you see. We're the only two juveniles of our sex. The women consider me rather improper. You watch."

Her soup finished, Iris stuck a cigarette in her long holder and lit it. Several pairs of scandalised eyes were immediately turned on her.

"Poor dears," she rattled on. "They don't really mind smoke, only they're still living in the nineteenth century and feel bound to register a silent protest. And yet I've seen some of them at Princes and

the Carlton, when they've been out dining with rich relations, tolerating a regular cloud of tobacco. Have one of mine—Mellachrino's. I sneak them out of the governor's tin."

"Thanks, I seldom smoke."

The waiter whisked away the soup plates and replaced them with others containing small slabs of halibut surrounded by pink sauce.

"Tur-boot," he announced.

"I wonder if he believes it," debated Iris. "I suppose he does as it's so described on the programme." She passed the menu card to Evelyn. "False pretences though. If I were a turbot I'd have the halibut up for defamation of character and ask for heavy damages. Halibut's always masquerading as turbot in boarding-houses and cheap restaurants."

"Economy explains it, I suppose," Evelyn suggested. "After all, things seem to be done very well here, considering the price."

Iris Brown nodded concurrence. "You've said it. That's why I'm here. Decent address; presentable house; cleanliness. And all for very little more than you'd pay at some of those grubby holes in Bloomsbury or Bayswater. Appearances are everything in this world, especially to anyone like me who works for her living. You know the old adage: 'To be poor and seem poor is the devil all over.' I asked for an extra thirty shillings a week on the strength of 'Highfield Hotel, Harrington Gardens,' when I applied for my

present job in the City. And I got it. Some people would call that gambling. I don't. It's diplomatic swank. What's your opinion, Eve ? "

" I wish I had your confidence. I'm very anxious to get work of some kind soon. Is it difficult in the City ? "

" Merely depends on your qualifications and a bit on your looks. What do you want to do ? "

" Anything I can. What do *you* do ? "

" Keep my eyes open, my ears skinned and my mouth shut. I'm confidential secretary to a financier, Sir Alfred Napp. Do you know anything about finance ? "

" Not the remotest. In fact, I'm peculiarly ignorant of anything to do with business. I've done a little secretarial work and I've been on the stage—chorus, that's all."

Iris Brown gave her another nod, a knowledgeable one. She lit a second cigarette and for a little while smoked reflectively.

" There's one thing I never do," she said. " Cross bridges until I come to them. Waste of time and mental energy. My advice to you is : adopt the Micawber attitude : hope for something to turn up. I can see you're not the sort that lies in bed allday reading novels. Your chance will come all right before long."

When they got up from the table she took Evelyn familiarly by the arm and steered her back to the lounge.

CHAPTER III

Iris Brown's curious compound of good-nature, shrewdness and whimsicality had taken Evelyn by storm. Obscurely she felt that she and this girl would soon be on an intimate footing. They had already overstepped the boundary line between acquaintance and friendship. That Iris was worldly and doubtless wily was apparent enough. The admission that she " sneaked " her employer's cigarettes was confirmation enough of the latter failing. But Evelyn was convinced that she was neither selfish nor catty, the two most prominent of feminine vices. Another of her qualities that she found strangely attractive was her touch of defiant daring. Evelyn rightly translated this into the possession of intrepid courage and an easy conscience. The memory of what she had said to Denys about romance in Ostend came back to her as she watched Iris imperturbably smoking her ill-gotten but aromatic cigarettes. Here was another instance of a girl who either didn't believe in illusions, or couldn't afford them.

The tray on which their coffee was brought held two

empty liqueur glasses. Iris produced a small silver flask from her hand-bag.

"This being a private hotel it doesn't purvey cocktails and liqueurs. You have to find your own or get somebody else to find them for you. This is the fag-end of a bottle that a sensible man, a Russian, made me a present of instead of scent. I keep it for special occasions. Hope you like kummel."

"I do indeed. I think it's the best of all liqueurs."

"Then you'll appreciate this. It's Baczewski's. Chin-chin, old thing, and a well-paid job on top of it."

"Thanks ever so much."

Evelyn took a sip or two.

"You're treating me royally, Iris. I appreciate it even more than this delicious stuff."

"I don't know about the royally; but you're rather like the princess of the fairy tales, Eve. Just that cut. How about the Fairy Prince?"

For a fleeting moment Evelyn's mind went back to Denys. She hardly knew why

"There isn't one," she said.

Iris was giving her an appraising look. There was critical approval in it.

"He'll come along, depend upon it. I can see him marching into 'Highfield' in good tweeds, Moykoff boots, an old-Rugby tie and the rest of it, ready to carry you off in his waiting Isotta Fraschini."

Evelyn laughed softly.

"There's more of imagination than true prophecy

in that picture, I'm afraid. I should be contented with any presentable young man—say a stockbroker or a solicitor—and any make of reliable two-seater. You're too ambitious."

"Why not? Ambition's cheap. In marriage I believe in starting at the top of the ladder. None of your climbing up slowly from a semi-detached villa to a possible flat in West Hampstead for me. When I marry, if ever I do, it'll be to a man who's rolling in money, lives in Grosvenor Square, owns a big yacht and has a grouse moor And, what's more, I've a conviction I shall come across him some day."

She gave Evelyn a slight nudge in order to draw her attention to a couple of men who, a little way off, were casting looks in their direction. Dropping her voice she said:

"There's your chance, old thing. Two provincials from up North. Lancashire, I fancy, judging by their funny accent. Potential husbands of the kind you were describing. Plenty of money, and one of 'em has a car. They're fearfully anxious to click. Been prospecting me ever since they came two days ago. Now they've seen you they're more keen than ever."

Out of the corner of her eyes Evelyn watched their approach. They were endeavouring to make it look casual. Both wore brand-new dark suits—the Lancastrian's usual substitute for evening dress—and their equally new shoes creaked. Apparently one of the objects of their visit to the metropolis had been to fit

themselves out in what they deemed to be the latest fashion. The result was not precisely that of Savile Row. They were in the early thirties.

"Damned funny the way of the uncivilised male in his pursuit of the beautiful," whispered Iris. "Nervousness personified."

"Er--hem!" began one of them. "Good-evening, Miss Brown. If it's all t' same to you we'll make free of a seat at your table." Without waiting for permission he dropped into one of the chairs. "This is Mr. Bradbury. Won't you introduce us to your lady friend?"

Iris did so with elaborate gravity.

"And how do you like London, Mr. Shanks?" she enquired.

"I'm" (he pronounced it "A'm") "not sure that I prefer it to Manchester, Miss Brown. The fact is we've nobody to talk to. No young ladies, you understand. The Lunnon ladies don't seem as friendly as ours up North."

"Perhaps we're more retiring in London," Evelyn suggested.

"That's it; not so free and easy."

"Stand-offish," augmented his friend. "A' spoke to one in Regent Street this morning and she gave me t' cold shoulder. I don't understand it."

"Perhaps she didn't understand you," said Iris sweetly.

"Maybe. I reckon she didn't know a gentleman

when she saw one. All I said was : 'You're a comely lass, my dear. I'll give you a ride in my car, if you like.'"

"And she actually refused it ?"

Mr. Shanks nodded gloomily. "She did that."

"It's unbelievable !"

Iris looked for acquiescence at Evelyn, who was having some difficulty in keeping a straight face.

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Miss Brown," put in Mr. Bradbury. "We don't—Mr. Shanks and me—like to be thought ungentlemanly. We've got plenty of brass and we're ready to spend it. A minute or two ago we were just saying how nice it would be if you and your friend, Miss Stanton—only we didn't know her name then—would let us take you for a motor run. Mr. Shanks has got his four-seater outside."

His eyes went expectantly and in turn to the two girls.

"This is so sudden." Iris gave a demure look at Evelyn. "What do you say, Eve ? Are you too tired after your journey ?"

Construing the question as acceptance on Iris's part subject to her own, Evelyn replied :

"No, I'm not tired."

"Where do you think of taking us ?" Iris cautiously enquired.

"Well, what about one of those places on the River Thames ?" queried Mr. Bradbury. "Somewhere where we can sit and look at the boats and get a bit

of something to eat afterwards. We've heard Richmond well spoken of. But I reckon you know better than we do."

"We'll leave it to you young ladies," put in Mr. Shanks. "It's all t' same to us."

"Let me think. There's quite a nice place at Maidenhead called Skindle's," Iris said guilelessly. "Just right for a summer evening. Rather rural and quiet, you know."

"We like quiet places," said Mr. Shanks eagerly. "Can we make it inside an hour?"

"Oh yes. It's on the Bath road, a very good one."

"And you're sure we can get a snack there and something to drink?"

"Yes, it's a—sort of hotel."

"Fine!"

Enthusiasm was in Mr. Shanks' voice. He made for the entrance to tickle up his carburettor, and was followed by Mr. Bradbury. Evelyn and Iris mounted the stairs for coats and hats. Iris was choking with laughter.

"Isn't Skindle's a very smart place?" Evelyn asked.

"Rather! And dashed expensive into the bargain?"

"But—won't they be annoyed when they find that out?"

"Sure to. The bounders! I mean to exact repayment for Shanks' impertinence to that poor girl in Regent Street. They both need a lesson, and I intend

to give them one they won't forget in a hurry."

The threat was made viciously. Evelyn could not cavil at it. Nevertheless, when she came downstairs equipped for the road, her contemplation of what the evening might bring forth was not free from trepidation.

But she forgot that when they were spinning through the traffic. Once free of it and out on the Bath road she took in great breaths of the cool evening air with huge enjoyment. Mr. Shanks was a competent if somewhat reckless driver. He didn't seem to mind overtaxing the engine-power of his not over-clean car.

She lay back in blissful silence while it whizzed through Slough and Taplow and then she became conscious of the pressure of Mr. Bradbury's knee against hers. Deeming it accidental she ignored it. Presently his arm began edging round her waist. As there could be nothing undesigned in that action she frustrated it by edging further away. For a minute or so Mr. Bradbury made no further move; then his amorous manœuvres recommenced.

Evelyn sat up.

"Haven't you enough room, Mr. Bradbury?" She spoke sharply.

"I was only trying to be friendly-like."

"You can do that in your own corner."

A pause.

"Well, I'm jiggered! What did you come out for, my dear?"

Evelyn resented the "my dear." It was imper-

tinent on such short acquaintance, but she let it pass.

"For a drive—that's all. Please don't spoil my enjoyment of it."

"Come now, don't be stand-offish. I don't mean any harm."

He relapsed into huffy silence, and she thought she had quelled his endearing propensities. Suddenly he said:

"It's not as if we hadn't been properly introduced. Up North, we don't waste time——"

She interrupted him with a nervous laugh.

"Apparently not. But you'll be wasting it now unless you behave. Take example from Mr. Shanks. *He's* not—annoying Miss Brown."

"He can't. He's driving."

His irrefutable tone tickled Evelyn's sense of humour. She burst out laughing. Taking this as encouragement, he seized hold of her and planted a smacking kiss on the side of her mouth. It took her so completely by surprise that she forgot to expostulate. His arm went round her again.

"I'm sure a nice girl like you don't mind a bit of a cuddle. Come on now. Let's have another."

Recovering herself, she managed to get free from his encircling arm and reach the back of the front seat.

"What's up ?" he enquired.

"I'm going to ask Mr. Shanks to stop, so that you can get out and change places with Miss Brown," she replied with dignified calmness.

" Here, don't do that ! " he protested. " I'll leave you alone, if that's all you want."

He edged back into his corner and irascibly mumbled something about London girls and their " funny ways." Thereafter, much to her relief, he sat sulkily silent until they reached the outskirts of Maidenhead. By that time he seemed to have recovered his equanimity, for he turned to her with a sheepish grin.

" I reckon you want a bit of knowing, Miss Stanton."

" Not necessarily," she said placably but equivocally.

CHAPTER IV

MR. SHANKS and Mr. Bradbury exchanged a look of apprehension as they followed Iris and Evelyn into Skindle's. This wasn't the quiet and rural place Miss Brown had described. It wasn't a "sort of hotel," it was a downright "swell" one. And it was full of "swell" people—"ladies" "got up" in the latest fashion and "gentlemen" (seemingly "women" and "men" were terms not used up North) in evening dress. Here was everything of the latest in adornment and luxury.

Mr. Shanks and Mr. Bradbury got hot and uncomfortable. They foresaw the expenditure of much money. They regretted their boast of possessing it. Each also foresaw the impracticability of sweet dalliance in a shady corner with his "young woman." For in spite of Miss Stanton's obduracy in the car, Mr. Bradbury had harboured a faint hope that she might prove more tractable on further acquaintance.

A whispered colloquy ensued.

"We've been had!"

"Ay."

"What's to do about it!"

"Make t' best of it. A'm not going to let 'em see's they've got the better of us."

"We'll have to give 'em wine and these here cocktails. Everybody's having them."

"We'll be lucky if we get out of it under a ten-shilling note."

"Ay."

Resignation stamped their faces. They were out of their element, no longer in command of the situation. Technically hosts, they had perforce to leave the course of entertainment in the hands of their companions. They were overpowered by their surroundings—the fashionable throng on the river-lawn, its subtle air of distinction, or, if not distinction, *insouciance*; the music, the brilliance of Murray's on the opposite bank. Even the river, with its incessant movement of immaculate launches, punts, motor-boats and skiffs, was a source of dismay to them. Comparing it, as they did, with Manchester's ship canal, it was a phantasmagoria.

And Iris did not spare them. She exacted every iota of the penalty she had threatened to impose. She plied them with cocktails but did no more than taste hers and then thought of another she liked better. As to cigarettes, when a selection was offered her she chose a box of a hundred of the most expensive brand. She kept her eyes skinned for acquaintances, discovered a couple of men, beckoned to them, and then went off with them and Evelyn to dance. When she returned,

as she did now and again, it was to offer her companions iced drinks at the expense of Messrs. Bradbury and Shanks. When she had had enough of dancing she asked for supper, quelling the hesitation she saw on the Lancastrians' faces by reminding them that they had particularly stood out for "a snack." She led them off to the dining-room like sheep, expressed a partiality for the highest priced dishes and the costliest brand of champagne.

Evelyn was almost sorry for the two men. They were impotent under their affliction, almost tongue-tied. To assuage their depression she drew them into conversation—asked if they were in the war.

"Ay," sighed Mr. Shanks, in the manner of one who devoutly wished it was still going on and himself back in the trenches.

"Were you wounded?"

"No. I was in the A.S.C."

"Let me see! That's the Army Service Corps, isn't it? All to do with supply?"

"Ay. Mr. Bradbury and myself are in the provision trade."

Wickedly Iris interjected: "Then I'm sure you'll both properly appreciate this delicious mayonnaise of trout and the *biscuit glacé* that's coming next."

Mr. Shanks made a noise in his throat. Mr. Bradbury pensively speculated on the price of the coming delicacy. He took it to be something exotic—Chinese perhaps.

Came the time when Iris was at a loss to think of anything more to add to the expense of the evening.

"And now, kind sirs," she said, "we'll go and powder our noses while you're settling with the waiter and starting up the car. We'll wait for you in the vestibule. Come on, Eve."

The words were honey-sweet. That much it was easy to concede. She knew the sting would come with the bill.

CHAPTER V

The drive back, this time with Evelyn on the front seat, was made in sombre silence. Neither Mr. Bradbury nor Mr. Shanks wanted to talk. The former kept as far away from Iris as he could get. Had she been a case of infectious disease he couldn't have shunned her more. He thought a lot about her though. She was a dangerous reptile—a deadly cobra – a blood-sucking vampire.

His share of the evening's expenses had come to nearly four pounds. He had been staggered by it. He hated Iris with a consuming hatred. And he was frightened of her.

After paying for the supper Bradbury and he had nearly come to blows. It had been a case of recrimination, Bradbury rounding on Shanks for introducing him to the girls, Bradbury retorting that he ought to consider himself lucky in not having been taken on by the Regent Street girl as well. Shanks countered this by twitting Bradbury with a complete ignorance of women. Hadn't he met Miss Brown two days ago ? Very well then : if he had any gumption

it ought to have been as plain as a pikestaff that she was a damned harpy. And so on and so forth. It was the only way in which they could vent their spleen.

Their moroseness endured all the way back to Harrington Gardens. On alighting Iris said:

"Thanks most awfully for a jolly evening. We've enjoyed it immensely. Do let us know when you've got another to spare. There's such a delightful place I want to show—— "

She was cut off in mid-speech. In a frantic hurry Mr. Shanks let in his clutch in order to get out of hearing.

"Weren't you rather hard on them?" Evelyn asked on the doorstep.

"Not a bit. What about that blighter Bradbury's odious behaviour to you on the way down? I couldn't forgive that."

"But how could you see? You didn't look——"

"Eyes in the back of my head, my dear."

Iris expressed the intention of smoking a final cigarette before going to bed, and invited Evelyn into her room. She had on a brilliant dressing-gown over shot-silk pyjamas when they met there. On her dressing-table there stood a variety of silver and cut-glass toilet requisites; her hairbrushes were of tortoise-shell inlaid with gold. How a girl who worked in the City should be able to afford such luxuries Evelyn was unable to understand.

"Don't be under the impression that I paid for any

of them," grinned the keen-witted girl. "They're all contributions from good-natured male things."

"Including that lovely dressing-gown ? "

"*And* my pyjamas. Rather down the road, aren't they ? Yes, I take everything that's going in this weary world. My creed, you know. Take my advice, old thing, and let it be yours too. If your head's screwed on the right way all the return you need make for the things bestowed on you by admirers is a bright smile and ordinary thanks. The more costly you are, the more men think of you."

"But . . ."

"No, there's nothing unscrupulous about it. I'm not unmoral. I don't barter away my immortal soul for half a dozen pairs of good silk stockings. I accept them as a homage to beauty ; and that's all a decent man expects. If he's poor I don't let him spend money on me. I only bleed blighters like Messieurs Shanks and Bradbury. They ask for it."

"You're frank enough, Iris. You seem to know men pretty well."

Iris made a wide gesture with her cigarette.

"My dear, the proper study of womenkind is men. Partly for defensive reasons, partly as an assistance for getting on in the world. The acceptance of those pretty things over there on the dressing-table and these good garments don't reduce any of the difficulties of paying one's way, unless of course one pops them. As wage-earners women are handicapped. Do you

imagine that if Sir Alfred Napp, my employer, had a male secretary he'd be as efficient as I am for the same salary? And think how much of our earnings we have to spend on making ourselves presentable!"

She came to a sudden stop.

"I'm talking too much; and it's time for bye-bye. You've had a long day. I have to be at my office by nine-thirty. Good-night, old thing."

Back in her own room, Evelyn fell to reviewing her recent past and her uncertain future.

"Things are beginning to happen to me with a vengeance," she thought. "Three weeks ago I was in a good situation, well treated by a sweet old lady, and now, here I am in a London hotel, without any apparent prospect of being able to keep myself, and living on money lent me by a stranger whom I happened to meet abroad. . . . Well, not exactly a stranger, perhaps. I can hardly call dear Denys that. And the first thing I do on leaving him is to go on the razzle-dazzle with a strange girl and two rather dreadful men at five minutes' notice!"

She solaced herself with the prospect of seeing her aunt in the morning and fell asleep thinking of many things she would have to tell that harassed, kindly woman.

Part Two

CHAPTER VI

THE Cradeleys lived at Chatsbury Buildings, a large block of red-brick flats in one of the hinterlands of Battersea. It was a district much favoured by the less successful members of the theatrical profession and music-hall artists, who, although hard-working, were not and never would be "bill-toppers."

Evelyn had often heard members of the "profession" describe one another as a "thoroughly sound Battersea actor." She had met many of them during her stay with the Cradeleys. They were not "artistic" like the more fashionable type of actor and actress of to-day. They did not read Georgian poetry or collect Japanese prints or hang on to the fringes of Society. They were just jolly, happy-go-lucky people with a hearty appetite for Guinness' stout and succulent fried fish; they took a keen interest in horse-racing, and had a fund of great courage in adversity. In their work, if not brilliant, they were at all events experienced, versatile and reliable.

In Battersea theatrical circles the Cradeleys, despite their chronic financial difficulties, were people

of some consequence, for "Bob" Cradeley could generally be relied upon in time of need to find some kind of a "shop" for his friends and clients.

When Evelyn pressed the bell at her aunt's door she was admitted by that lady in person.

"Oh, my dear," she cried between a succession of kisses, "come in do! I *am* thankful to see you safe and sound! But there, I knew you'd manage somehow. I would have sent you ten pounds if I'd had it to spare. I was terribly grieved that I couldn't. I told Bob three wasn't nearly enough, and I've been so uneasy. . . . Let me take your things. . . . There now, come into the drawing-room, dear. And how are you?"

Mrs. Cradeley, a small, faded woman of middle age with an air of total disability to cope with the trials and difficulties of her daily life, led her niece into a small and rather untidy room and pressed her into one of the chairs of state. Words poured out of her relentlessly, unceasingly, in a rapid stream; and although she constantly uttered such remarks as, "Well, my dear, let me have a look at you"; or, "How have you been all this long time?" she never once waited for answers to her questions, but rattled on remorselessly about her own troubles and trials.

"I don't know when we've had such an awful time of it as this last twelve months, I really don't. Bob's been trying to set things right by backing horses, and you know what that means. His 'winners' always

seem to come in ten minutes or so after the race is over. Then he gets depressed and has a drink or two, and of course his temper next morning is very trying. The consequence is his business suffers. I really don't know how I've managed to make both ends meet. It's a mercy we haven't any children." The little woman sighed deeply. "But that's enough about myself. Here you are safe back in England, Evie, my dear. That's something. And now tell me all about it."

Evelyn settled down to an account of her recent doings. It came easily enough up to the period of Mrs. Maribon's death and her change of quarters to Euzentern; but the rest, having to do so exclusively with Denys, was rather a trial. She managed to make light of the episode of the communicating bedrooms and the subsequent uncle and niece fiction which the similarity of their names had engendered. But of the hotel servants' assumption that she and Denys were man and wife she could not bring herself to speak.

Still, she said enough, and showed so much hesitation in the saying of it, to give her aunt cause for a little natural anxiety. No aunt, in the absence of personal knowledge of a strange man's ethics, would have attributed altruistic motives to Denys. Mrs. Cradeley couldn't help suspecting him. And these suspicions were augmented when Evelyn confessed to the fact that he had settled her hotel bill, taken her on to Ostend, paid her fare back to London, and on top of all that given, or at least lent her, ten pounds.

"But, Evie," Mrs. Cradeley exclaimed in consternation, "how could you let him? A well brought up girl oughtn't to take money from a man, even as a loan And this one a complete stranger! I'm sure your uncle won't like it."

"But what could I do, Auntie? I was in such a desperate fix! You wrote that you couldn't put me up, so how on earth was I to get board and lodging without his help? All I've got between me and—well, starvation, is thirteen pounds!"

The forlorn admission disquieted Mrs. Cradeley. And yet her sense of decency made her say:

"You must pay him back, Evie, as soon as ever you can. You can't be indebted to a man you scarcely know. It isn't right."

"Of course it isn't right, and of course I shall pay him back as soon as I'm able to. But how am I to manage it until I've found a job?"

To this conundrum Mrs. Cradeley had no effective answer. Greatly as she disapproved of what Evelyn had done, she was unable to suggest any remedy.

"What you must do, Auntie," said Evelyn firmly, "is to persuade Uncle Bob to get me either a 'walk-on' at some London theatre or a 'shop' in another revue chorus. Of course I shall look out for myself as well. I'll answer every likely advertisement. Oh, what a pity it is I was so foolishly brought up!"

"You see, my dear, your father never for a moment thought——"

" Don't let us resurrect the past. It's bad enough to have to face the present."

" True enough," Aunt Emmeline concurred sorrowfully. "Well, we must do the best we can, and you may rest assured that I'll help you in every way that's possible. I'll talk to your uncle as soon as he comes back from the office. Perhaps he'll be able to suggest something. And now, as it's one o'clock, I'll see about getting some lunch."

After a frugal meal, during which she had once again to listen to a prolonged recital of her aunt's troubles and difficulties, Evelyn took her leave, feeling rather more depressed than she had been on her arrival. In London, the outlook for a girl of gentle breeding with no money, few friends and no business abilities, came home to her more forcibly than ever.

CHAPTER VII

"WHAT'S that?" demanded Mr. Cradeley.

He was heavily built. His thick reddish hair was cropped like a scratch wig; his shaven cheeks had a shiny red glaze.

He had not come back directly from his office in the precincts of Covent Garden. He had spent an hour or two in a Strand bar imbibing a good many whiskies and watching the "ticker" as it reeled out the racing news. He had backed two losers that afternoon; he had been unsuccessful in placing a low comedian at one of the Syndicate halls, thereby failing to secure a good commission on a forty-pound salary; and he was in a very bad temper.

"What's that you're saying about Evelyn?" he repeated testily. "Back in town, is she? Well, what about it?"

For a good ten minutes he sat listening to his wife's account of what had befallen her niece. The upsetting story had loomed more menacing with the hours. She hadn't told Evelyn of the sale of the spare-room furniture in order to pay overdue household bills, and her

own troubles made her paint the girl's predicament in the darkest hues. Unconsciously, too, she blackened Denys' character by putting the worst construction on his motives.

"What did you say the fellow's name was?" asked Cradeley.

"She didn't say. Or if she did I've forgotten it."

"An artist, though."

"Yes, on a sketching tour."

After a period of reflection, Cradeley observed:

"He must be pretty well-off if he could afford to pay her way and give her a good time in Ostend and then top off all that with a tenner into the bargain. My word, some people have all the luck!"

"If you mean Evie, *I* think it's anything but luck. I look on it as most unfortunate."

"You would."

He said it without emphasis. It was merely the reflection of a man of gross fibre on the mental attitude of a woman of finer sensibility. Cradeley's ethics and those of his wife seldom tallied. In a meditative tone, meant for himself more than her, he went on:

"What's to prevent her tapping him for some more?"

"Bob! How can you? She wouldn't do that."

"Hmpf! She hasn't shown any particular backwardness in that way so far."

"I tell you she couldn't help herself," Mrs. Cradeley said petulantly. "She was in a fix. You're partly responsible for that. If you'd only sent her enough to — "

"Why should I? She's your niece, not mine. Why should I be expected to find money for her. She's got no claim on me. Besides, you know perfectly well I hadn't got any to send."

Mrs. Cradeley did not pursue that line of argument. It was too well-founded.

"She must pay him back what she's borrowed," she had to content herself with repeating. "She wants to——"

"Borrowed!" he sniggered. "*I* never knew a woman who took money from a man wanting to pay it back! And I've seldom met a man who expected it."

Mrs. Cradeley was tempted to retort that the sort of women he knew were not as fastidious as they might be. But she resisted it. She didn't want to quarrel with him; she wanted to help Evelyn.

"There's her reputation to think of as well," she said.

"Eh?"

Cradeley's head went up sharply. So far, he hadn't troubled himself about Evelyn's reputation. He hadn't thought of it; or, if he had, only in a detached way. Nor had the circumstance of the communicating bedrooms made much impression on his mind. The relation between the one and the other had escaped him. Although crafty, his intellect was not of the order that makes quick deductions. But now that his wife had pointedly drawn attention to the question of Evelyn's reputation, the moral issue

suggested by it became apparent to him. Quite suddenly he found something new and quite interesting about which to speculate.

"Well," said Mrs. Cradeley not too readily, "it's not quite nice to think of what people might say if they heard of her going about with a—a comparative stranger like this artist. Of course, I don't for a moment imagine there was anything wrong in it. If ever there was a straight girl, it's Evie."

Cradeley hardly heard the last sentence. He was thinking.

"That's an idea!" he mused aloud.

"What is?"

"Nothing." He brisked up. "Thirteen pounds in all Evie's got, you say? And she's paying three guineas a week for her board and lodging. Means she'll be on the rocks before very long."

"That's what worries me so. And it does her. If she doesn't get something to do pretty soon we shall have to let her come and stay with us, though I really don't know how we'll manage it. She's willing to go into the chorus again if nothing better turns up, but I'd rather she didn't."

"Why not? What's the matter with the chorus? Anyway, beggars can't be choosers. I tell you, I'm not going to have her sponging on us. Unless——"

Cradeley broke off. He wasn't ready just yet to specify the particular alternative that was germinating in his mind.

"Isn't there anything else you can do to help her, Bob?"

He took his half-smoked cigar out of his mouth and regarded it meditatively before he replied.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "It wants thinking over."

His wife would not have derived much comfort had she known the nature of his thoughts.

Part Two

CHAPTER VIII

NOTHING about her husband annoyed Joyce Stoughton more than his refusal to lose his temper with her. In the early days of their married life Denys had displayed to the full the characteristic American attitude of adulation and respect towards the goddess who had condescended to wed a mere mortal like himself. He had gladly made himself a doormat for her to wipe her pretty shoes upon, and she had not hesitated to take full advantage of the privilege. He had never complained of her extravagance ; he had put up with her caprices and her ill-temper.

But as the years went by a change had come over him which, though hardly visible on the surface, had not escaped Joyce's watchful eye. The fact of the matter was that Denys had ceased to care for her. His behaviour towards her, however, remained exemplary. He still showed her outward respect and deference ; he still fetched and carried for her and did his best to make her happy and comfortable.

But he did it now chiefly from a sense of duty and force of habit. If Joyce could not irritate him into an

outburst of anger, neither could she awaken his ardour by a sudden display of tenderness. He had grown indifferent to her. She had tried him too far. The knowledge that her physical charms no longer exercised their old influence over him touched her vanity and exacerbated her naturally jealous disposition.

Though she was still comely, she was no longer the conventionally pretty English blonde with a complexion of milk and roses which she had been when Denys married her. Despite her efforts at the toilet table, she looked her thirty-two years—a rose still beautiful but verging on the full-blown. A few years more, and some of the petals would begin to fall.

At present, however, she still had plenty of capacity to attract masculine admiration, and many men meeting her for the first time would have preferred the more mature Joyce to her "chocolate box" predecessor. What chiefly marred her appearance was the sulky and self-indulgent mouth which she was perpetually examining, lip-stick in hand, in her pocket mirror.

When the taxi drew out of the station yard she said :

"Where did you pick her up, Denys ? Or did you take her with you ? "

The question was marked by a dangerous suavity with which he was only too painfully familiar. He raised a hand to suppress a yawn. He was rather tired.

"Who do you mean ? "

"Oh, don't make a pretence of innocence ! The girl

I saw you with, of course. I don't imagine you keep a harem."

"Oh, the girl I saw off just now," he replied, with a fairly good attempt at indifference. "She was just an hotel acquaintance who happened to be coming back by the same boat. In America, you know, we don't regard it as a crime to talk to our fellow-travellers. I've never quite got used to the taciturnity most English people adopt on a journey."

The sniff that Joyce indulged in was intended to show her contempt for this evasion. She was quite sure it was one.

"What sort of a time did you have at Marlow?" he enquired after the pause that ensued. He felt no curiosity regarding the visit she had paid there during his absence, nor in the people she had stayed with. They were her friends, not his. But he thought it as well to show a little courteous interest in her doings

"Oh, much the same as usual," she replied peevishly. "We went to Murray's once or twice, and to that new place at Bray. But I had the most damnable luck at bridge. I came away seven pounds to the bad. Otherwise it was amusing enough. The man who's playing lead in the new show at the Piazza was there."

"Which means that he paid you a good deal of attention, I suppose!"

There was nothing accusatory in his tone. If anything, it verged on indifference. Joyce, for all that, fired up at the remark.

" If he did, are you in a position to object ? In the first place he was a fellow-guest and he belongs to a profession I used to be in. And secondly, I didn't pick him up in the casual way you seem to have done with that girl at Victoria. I'm lunching with him to-morrow at the 'Ivy,'" she added defiantly. " If there's one thing I can't stand, Denys it's hypocrisy "

Denys acknowledged the rebuke with a little bow.

" It's a blessing that one is always hardest on the faults one doesn't happen to possess," he said with an enigmatic smile.

Their taxi was now climbing the steep ascent of Haverstock Hill, past little houses with shady gardens. Soon the red-glazed tiles of Hampstead Tube Station came into sight, and the red brick tower of the fire station that keeps guard over the Everyman Theatre. The cab creaked up the sharp incline, turned down a narrow village street of small eighteenth-century houses of mellowed brick, and finally came to a halt before one of those picturesque country cottages which contribute so greatly to the old-world charm of Hampstead.

" Corner Cottage," as the Stoughtons' residence was called, had a small front garden, bright with flowers, and a large walled one at the back. In this stood an airy studio which Denys had built for himself some years previously. It was a delightful little house of which all their friends envied them possession. For a husband and wife not in perfect harmony, however,

the limited accommodation of the little house had its drawbacks. As soon as Denys had, by painful experience, come to realise this, he had fitted out his studio as a bedroom and he now used it for that purpose.

"Well, I'm glad to be home again," he said rather abstractedly as he entered and looked about the pleasant square hall.

Joyce read sincerity into the remark and thawed a little. She, too, was fond of her pretty home. For a *ci-devant* actress she was not bad at running a house. On this score, at least, Denys had little with which to reproach her. Their house-parlourmaid was well trained; the cook knew her business; and everything was always in apple-pie order. In a measure this was due to Joyce's treatment of her domestic staff. With Denys a show of temper did not necessarily result in disaster. He couldn't give her a month's notice. They could and inevitably would.

Denys had bought the freehold of Corner Cottage. Sentiment had had a good deal to do with the purchase. He had traced its history since the year 1768 and liked to think that Romney and Constable must have been familiar with it, or its outside at least. He had filled it as far as possible with late eighteenth-century cottage furniture, and the general effect was altogether charming. Only one thing did his home lack and that was a spirit of concord between its inmates.

CHAPTER IX

In his work, although by no means an ultra-modernist of the sort that flourishes in Montparnasse within a near radius of the Café du Dôme and the Café de la Rotonde, Denys was nevertheless a long way from belonging to the safely-representational school which still controls the policy of the Royal Academy. He was steadily hammering out his own technique, learning how to see things freshly through his own eyes instead of other people's, and slowly but surely discovering an individual means of expression.

Despite his long devotion to his art, he did not regard himself as being out of the experimental stage of development. For several years in succession he had exhibited at Burlington House, but of late he had only sent his pictures to the summer exhibitions of the London group. Connoisseurs had acquired examples of them, confident that sooner or later his market value would rise considerably. Contenting himself with this modified success he resisted the temptation to give a "one man show" in one of the Bond Street galleries, which Joyce constantly urged him to do. He had no

intention of making what she called a " big splash " prematurely.

This reluctance on his part to plunge headlong into the fight for fame and notoriety exasperated her almost beyond endurance. When she married she had cherished the ambition of becoming the wife of a Royal Academician, in her opinion the highest position to which any painter could aspire. Now all her hopes of attaining to it were dashed to the ground.

" Why on earth can't you paint the sort of pictures that sensible people appreciate ? " she would nag, on her occasional visits to the studio. " Who on earth wants to look at a purple horse against a green and yellow sky background ! None of your pictures is ever in the least like the things they're supposed to represent."

Denys shrugged his shoulders. " I'm a painter, not a colour photographer, my dear. I'm sorry if you can't appreciate the difference."

" Well, if I were furnishing a house I'd certainly prefer to see artistic photographs on its walls than any of your masterpieces."

" No doubt," said Denys, and thereupon filled his pipe and went on painting.

After his return from Belgium, Denys settled down to everyday routine. He worked while the light held. In the evenings old friends, mainly artists, would drop in at the garden studio, smoke a pipe, drink a whisky-and-soda, and talk " shop." Chief among these were Hugh Wingfield, portrait painter, and R.A., and Stephen

Hollins, a young painter who was gaining well-earned recognition in the Art world.

Whilst telling of his doings in Belgium, Denys was often on the point of referring to his Euzentern adventure. But he never did. Although not much given to introspection and self-analysis, he could not help speculating upon the real cause of this reluctance. If he were as completely detached in regard to Evelyn Stanton as he persuaded himself that he was, what more natural than that he should lightly recount the incident of their meeting, without of course giving a clue to her identity? Did not his disinclination to refer to her indicate that she occupied his thoughts more than he was prepared to admit?

For some days he speculated upon this point, and his speculations had the effect of deterring him from ringing up Evelyn to enquire how she was getting on. Sooner or later common decency would force him to do this One couldn't suddenly drop a friend, even a friend of short-standing, like a hot potato. But as he wanted to meet her again very much more keenly than he thought was right and fitting, obstinacy kept him from the telephone. There was Joyce to be considered. He knew she was watching him like a lynx, and while her jealous fit persisted he was determined not to give her the slightest ground for any outburst of rancour. The thought of Evelyn as a subject of contention between Joyce and himself was too odious for contemplation.

So the days went by and he made no move.

Part Two

CHAPTER X

ABOUT a fortnight after his return from Euzentern Charles Milward, strolling along the Strand, discovered that his palate was hankering to be assuaged by something cool and refreshing in the way of a drink—for the day was warm and the hour synchronised with his customary need of a matutinal stimulant. The bars, in anticipation of this need on the part of thirsty souls such as his, stood invitingly open. But Milward had a prejudice against solitary drinking. It seemed to argue lack of popularity, unsociability.

The question was, whom should he prevail upon to join him? He suddenly bethought him of Bob Cradeley. Not only was Bob's office close by, but he never said "No" to a drink, and he could sometimes put one on to a good thing in the way of a special matinée engagement.

Milward accordingly wended his way towards a narrow street full of vegetable-carts, entered a grimy doorway, mounted three flights of stairs, and enquired of the red-haired youth who presided over the outer office whether Mr. Cradeley was in. A forlorn woman, heavily painted and dressed with pathetic sprightliness,

occupied one of the wooden benches biding the agent's pleasure.

"Superannuated chorus girl out of a job," Milward noted. "Won't get one either."

"Half a minute, Mr. Milward."

The office boy disappeared into an inner room. He emerged a moment later and announced:

"Governor just coming."

The depressed-looking woman sat up, showing signs of strong emotion.

Cradeley appeared with his hat perched jauntily on the back of his head.

"Hullo, Charlie!" he cried. Then to the pathetic figure on the bench: "Sorry, Miss—er—Whatsername, but I haven't anything for you. Things very slack just now. Look in again in about a fortnight's time."

"I can't wait a fortnight," whimpered the unfortunate woman.

But the agent had already grasped his friend's hand, and nobody heard her except the boy with the red hair. He spent the greater part of his days listening to such laments, and this one fell heedlessly on his ears.

Outside in the street, Cradeley said:

"It's a hell of a while since I saw you, Charlie. Where you been? You're looking in the pink, anyhow. Where shall we go? Henekey's? The Coal Hole?"

"What about the Bodega?" suggested Milward. "More room to sit down."

"Right you are. Anywhere you like."

They set off in the direction of Bedford Street and were soon ensconced in a quiet corner of the roomy, old-fashioned bar with a couple of drinks before them.

After cursing the slackness of business and the unfruitfulness of all the racing tips he had received of late, Cradeley, more by way of making conversation than because he was really interested in anybody's affairs but his own, asked Milward what had been happening to him since their last meeting.

"Oh, I've been having a sort of a holiday in Belgium," was the reply. "I'm booked for leading man, you know, in 'The Girl Next Door'—Franklin's company. Tour opens next month. It's rather a heavy part, so I looked about for the quietest place I could find to study in. My God, I found it, too! The most dead-alive hole in the whole blasted country. Place called Euzentern. Ever heard of it?"

Cradeley pricked up his ears. Euzentern! Why, wasn't that where Evelyn met the painter fellow? He gave no sign, however, of ever having heard the name before.

"Can't say I have," he said. "How did you get on there?"

"Oh, so-so. Mugged up my part. Did without anything stronger than weak lager because I couldn't get it; and that's about all. The bally place is right off the map. Only thing one can say in its favour is: you couldn't choose a better for an unofficial honeymoon. Not much risk of any friend of the wife's running across you there!"

"No—er—trippers, eh?"

"No, but I'll tell you what I did strike. An English couple in the hotel where I put up. An artist and a deuced pretty girl. Supposed to be married, though I doubt it. She was one of these 'certified brides' by the look of her"—he chuckled at the facetious implication he gave to the American meaning of the term. "I expect the last thing in the world they counted on was being spotted by a compatriot."

"Speak to them?" Cradeley queried.

"No. But I'd have liked a quiet half-hour with the girl. She was a stunner! These artists do know how to pick 'em, and no mistake!"

"Didn't happen to catch their names, I suppose?"

"I didn't hear them. But I found out all the same. Partly, that is. Looked 'em up in the visitors' register. Denys Stoughton, his was. I'm not sure about hers. Looked the same, but it was smudged, all but the Christian name—Evelyn. I'm almost certain I've heard of *him*. You remember Joyce Maudslay, a little blonde bit of goods who left the stage some years back? Well, she married an artist with a name something like Stoughton. Anyway, there he was with this fetching bit of skirt who certainly wasn't little Joyce. Funny world, isn't it?"

Milward finished with a short laugh. Cradeley echoed it with his lips. In his eyes, instead of amusement, there was a glint of something more like craftiness.

Denys Stoughton ! Mentally he repeated the name, memorising it.

" Have one with me, Charlie," he urged. He called the boy and gave his order.

"Cheerio, old man." Milward gave Cradeley a jovial dig in the ribs. "And here's to all 'certified brides.'"

Without any undue eagerness, and as one who puts a question merely with a view to keeping conversation going, Cradeley asked :

" What sort of a looking man was he, this painter ? "

" Oh, well built, slim. About thirty I should say. Dark hair and eyes. Might have been an American by the look of him."

" And pretty well lined—what ? They usually have to be to go about with temporary wives on the Continent. 'It's the rich what gets the pleasure and the poor what gets the blame,' eh, Charlie ? "

" Well, he couldn't have spent a lot at the hotel in Euzentern, even if he'd been Crœsus or Rockefeller, so there's no knowing. He looked well turned out enough to have plenty of oof. Have another ? No ? So long, then. Let me know if you hear of something good in a London production with plenty of brass behind it. The provinces are all right but give me London town, old boy. There's no other village like it."

Milward departed, leaving Cradeley alone with his thoughts. These must have been of remarkable interest, for he sat staring straight in front of him for about ten minutes, forgetting to smoke, forgetting even to

finish his drink. When at last his meditations came to an end he returned to his office and consulted his telephone directory.

*Stoughton, Denys. Corner Cottage, Harper's Lane, N.W.*3. *Hampstead. Tel.* 57643. There *was* a Denys Stoughton, anyway. And plenty of painters lived in Hampstead. He turned next to "Who's Who," in which capacious volume he found a brief entry regarding the inhabitant of Corner Cottage. "Painter. Born in New York, Jan. 20, 1887. Studied art in Paris, Rome, and Barcelona. Exhibited Royal Academy 1919, 1920. . . . Married October 1919, Joyce Maudslay, d. Charles Maudslay of the Laurels, Wimbledon. Club—Arts Club."

Cradeley ruminated over these and other details of Stoughton's career with which the book supplied him. Then he turned up a list of clubs to discover the amount of the entrance fee and annual subscription to the Arts Club, an establishment with which he was unfamiliar. Finding that both were substantial, he nodded to himself contentedly.

Then came a further period of reflection. Should he telephone and ask for an appointment, or call and chance it? Several times his hand went to the receiver, but he left it hooked. Wouldn't do to put the fellow on his guard. Might get in a witness to the interview. Better catch him unawares.

Having finally arrived at this decision, Cradeley, with unusual consideration, sent a telegram to his wife to say that he would not be home for dinner.

Part Two

CHAPTER XI

CRADELEY dined at Simpson's in the Strand and did himself well. He told himself that he could afford it, and the pint of good champagne followed by an old cognac, with which he washed it down.

Ever since the day when he had learnt from his wife of Evelyn's doings in Belgium—queer enough in his view—he had been revolving the possibility of reaping some advantage from them. In a phrase : he was out to extract money from the man she had met there. As he saw it, such a proceeding ought not to present any great difficulty, providing the man could be discovered and that he proved bleedable. It would only be a question of pressure by one party and a capacity to pay on that of the other.

So far, Cradeley had been unable to ascertain his prospective victim's name and address. Now, thanks to Milward's love of gossip and the assistance of a couple of books of reference, that he had the requisite information, it only remained to make use of it.

What man of good position and a married one to boot would, Cradeley asked himself, have the strength

of mind to resist a well-authenticated charge of libertinism in having posed as the husband of a young, single and innocent girl? (The innocence, which he didn't altogether believe in, would be employed for scenic effect.) Why, the fact that they had occupied adjoining rooms with a communicating door between was enough to condemn him! Cradeley anticipated an easy job. What he liked best about the affair was the opportunity it presented of extracting a good lump sum of hush-money without anybody but himself and the victim being the wiser. The victim might squeal, but he would surely pay up rather than face exposure. And he wouldn't talk.

So, with his plan of operations carefully rehearsed, Cradeley set out jauntily for Corner Cottage. It was nine o'clock when he reached it. In answer to his ring the parlour-maid opened to him.

"Will you please tell Mr. Stoughton that a gentleman would like to see him," he said in his most impressive manner.

"What name, please?"

"Mr. Stoughton wouldn't know my name. I won't detain him long."

Denys was in his studio, reading, when the maid delivered her message.

"What d'you think he's after, Mary?" he asked.

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir. He's not an artist gentleman to look at"

"Well," said Denys with a whimsical smile, "as I

don't owe anybody any money. as far as I'm aware, you may as well bring him along."

During the maid's absence, Joyce, hearing voices, had come into the hall.

"Are you waiting for somebody?" she enquired.

"Er—yes, Mr. Stoughton. The maid has gone to him with a message from me."

"Oh, yes." Joyce's eyes narrowed suspiciously. She didn't quite like the look of the visitor "My husband is in his studio, I think."

She retreated as Mary reappeared.

"Will you come this way, sir?"

Cradeley followed her into the garden.

"Nice little place," he said to himself. "Must have cost a tidy bit of money."

Denys put down his book and rose when Cradeley was shown into the studio. There was nothing in the latter's appearance which impelled him to offer to shake hands.

"You wish to see me?" he asked.

"Well, Mr. Stoughton, if we could have a few words in strict privacy"—Cradeley cast a cautious look about him—"I think it might be to the advantage of us both."

Denys' eyebrows went up.

"Pray sit down," he said, indicating a chair. "I don't pretend to understand what you are driving at, but perhaps you will explain."

Cradeley took the proffered chair and proceeded to

stare at him for some moments in a silence that was intended to be impressive. Denys returned gaze for gaze. He might have been inspecting some curious and rather unpleasing specimen of animal life in the Zoo.

"It's about this little affair at Euzentern, Mr. Stoughton. Now, I've heard the whole story from my niece, Miss Evelyn Stanton, and I want, if I can, to avoid any unnecessary unpleasantness. I've no doubt you behaved handsomely to the girl—in a way. But as a man of the world you must realise, as clearly as I do, that the matter can't be left where it is. You've compromised her, Mr. Stoughton, there's no getting away from it—compromised her badly."

"I see." Denys was still standing. "So you are Mr. Robert Cradeley?"

"That's my name."

"The man who left his niece to face an impossible situation in a foreign country, and did not even send her enough money to enable her to get back to England."

"Come, come, Mr. Stoughton, that won't do. That's all tall talk. I haven't called on you just to——"

"I wonder you had the effrontery to call on me at all."

"I suppose," sneered Cradeley, "you'd rather I'd asked for *Mrs.* Stoughton, eh?"

Denys fumed.

"I presume your visit has a definite object," he said in a steely voice. "Please to state precisely what it is?"

"Ah, that's better. You want to come to cues. Well, that's what *I* want." To himself Cradeley said: "Scored the first point, what." Aloud he proceeded: "All I'm thinking of is my niece's reputation. Her good name, as you may say, is all she has in the world, and if you endanger that—as you undoubtedly did at Euzentern, by sleeping in a room communicating with hers and passing yourself off as her husband—you do an injury to that reputation which is well-nigh irreparable."

Cradeley reeled this out with a fluency that made Denys suspect it had been memorised beforehand His steely gaze did not waver.

"You seem to be quite letter-perfect. Have you anything else to say?"

"Yes, a good deal. In the first place, I resent being told that I left my niece in the lurch. You've no right to say that. We're poor people, and we sent her all we could spare. If you think a counter-charge like that is going to excuse your conduct, you'll find yourself very much mistaken," Cradeley finished belligerently.

"By whom?"

"Damn it, by everybody. By me."

"I see. At least, I fancy I begin to."

"You needn't sneer. I may as well tell you, right

away, that what I've said can be substantiated by a third party—a witness of what you were up to over in Belgium. An Englishman too. He——"

"One moment, Mr. Cradeley. Is it your suggestion—and also that of the third party you refer to—that I had immoral relations with your niece? Be quite definite, please."

Cradeley fidgeted. He hadn't anticipated this calm and cool reception of his accusation. Nor did he miss the sarcasm underlying it.

"What other conclusion do you expect me to have come to?" he spluttered. "Look here, Mr. Stoughton, it's about time you came off the high horse. Bluffing won't do with me. I know too much. I'm here to protect my niece. You've compromised her and you know it. So does the party I spoke of just now."

"I altogether deny that your niece has been compromised. As for your witness, I regard his alleged evidence as worthless."

"Oh, all right. That means, I suppose, you're prepared to let it go before a judge and jury? 'Pon my word you've got a nerve! On the facts, what jury in the world would believe in your pretended innocence?"

The intended threat did not disturb Denys. His mind was occupied with Evelyn, of how to protect her against these scandalous suggestions.

Watching his thoughtful expression, Cradeley took it to imply capitulation. On the assumption that one could always get better terms out of a man in

a submissive state of mind, he changed his tone.

"Look here, Mr. Stoughton, don't let's lose our tempers. I'd much rather appeal to you as one gentleman to another. Now, you're a married man and a man of the world. You know as well as I do that whether you're innocent or whether you're guilty doesn't matter a rap and that it won't help my niece. She stands to be shot at—to lose her character, anyway. That's a serious thing for a nice girl. It's all very well to say that you consider my witness's evidence worthless. We'll suppose it is, just for argument's sake. All the same, I've got to keep his mouth shut. Family pride calls for it."

Once more Cradeley looked stealthily round the studio to make certain that it harboured no eavesdropper. Alive to the risk of the dangerous game he was playing, he didn't share Stoughton's indifference to the value of secondary evidence and more especially of oral testimony.

Lowering his voice he leant forward in his chair.

"I've got to buy his silence. You must see that. How's it to be done without your help? I'm not in a position to shell out. And if I were I should fail to see the justice of being made to pay for an injury to me and mine." He shook his head in strong negation. "No, sir; if ever there was a case for clear redress this is one. Some money will have to pass, and it's up to you to provide it."

"I see," said Denys quietly.

"I'm very glad you do, sir." Cradeley licked his lips lustfully. "Now I'm not going to ask you for a penny more than the circumstances justify. On behalf of my niece I'll accept five hundred pounds as compensation for what she has suffered. You'll then be doing the decent thing by the girl, and I, on my side, will undertake to prevent the scandal from spreading, however much it may cost me to do it."

Nausea culminated in Denys. He had all along been itching to throw the man out. Now, if need be, he meant to do so.

"So that's it, Mr. Cradeley—blackmail!" he said grimly. "I've only been waiting—tolerating your contaminating presence—to get a definite admission of it. Now get out of here at once, you filthy scoundrel! And if you ever show your nose again anywhere near my house I'll send for the police. Doyou get that?"

He crossed to the studio door and held it wide. From outside there came the swish of a dress, and he just caught sight of a figure in white flitting up the garden path.

Scowling, Cradeley rose from his chair.

"I'll make you pay for this, you——" he began.

Denys, arms slightly bent, fists clenched, made a move towards him. Cradeley hurriedly picked up his hat and passed out. There was a gate in the garden wall directly opposite the studio door. Overhauling him, Denys flung this open and catching him by the collar sent him flying through it.

A stream of threats came from the lane. Denys paid no attention. He was white with fury. He felt sullied and besmirched by contact with this specimen of sordid villainy. Bolting the gate he strode up the garden path and entered the house.

CHAPTER XII

HE found Joyce in the drawing-room curled up on the sofa, smoking a cigarette and pretending to be immersed in an illustrated paper. But that nonchalant attitude did not deceive him. He sat down facing her, waiting for her to speak.

It was one of her good days. She was wearing a modish dinner frock of white georgette and silver tissue. The subdued beams of a shaded lamp, playing on her fair hair, gave her a girlish look. They did not, however, quite conceal the petulant expression of her mouth nor her general air of suppressed excitation. When at length she languidly lifted her eyes from the paper they shone with a malevolent gleam.

"So your sins have found you out, have they, my good Denys? I'm not surprised."

"Eavesdropping!" he rapped out. "How like you!"

"If you choose to talk at the top of your voice when I happen to be in the garden close by your studio you can hardly expect me *not* to hear. You can call it eavesdropping if you like. In any case,

I heard all I wanted to about you and your 'casual hotel acquaintance.' I presume you're not quite such a humbug as to keep up the pretence any longer that there was nothing in that vulgar episode ? "

" Yes, you do presume. If you choose to accept the word of a blackmailer before mine, you can. It would be like you."

" My God ! " Joyce sprang to her feet, tearing her paper across in hysterical frenzy. " This is really too thick ! Even if you *are* an adulterer you needn't be a damned hypocrite into the bargain. Do you think I'm such a complete fool that I can't see through you ? Oh, how I wish there was some man handy—a *man*, not a cur—to give you the thrashing you deserve ! " She clenched her fists, stamping in her fury.

Denys kept his temper.

" I've already given you to understand quite clearly," he said, " that nothing improper took place between myself and the girl I happened to travel home with. I am not an 'adulterer,' as you melodramatically describe it ; neither am I a hypocrite. As for a thrashing, all I can say is, I'm not likely to get it—at least from any man friend of yours."

By this time Joyce had reached the tearful stage. She threw herself on to the sofa, buried her head in the cushions and began to sob convulsively. A year or two ago Denys would have knelt down and tried to comfort her. But experience had taught him that indulgence of that sort merely encouraged her to fresh

outbursts. He sat for a few minutes, watching her in silence, a prey to unutterable melancholy. Then he got up and spoke very distinctly so that she could not help but hear him.

"I'm sorry, Joyce, but this trouble is of your own making. It you won't believe me I can't help it. I'm going to bed now. Ring the studio bell if you want anything. Good-night." He sighed heavily as he left the room.

"She'll stop weeping as soon as I've gone," he thought; "and drink half the whisky in the decanter . . . and then have a head like lead in the morning!"

The reaction after two successive scenes, first with Cradeley and then with Joyce, left Denys limp and dejected. He undressed and got into bed. But for a long time he could not sleep. It was not Joyce's unjust accusations nor Cradeley's crude attempt at blackmail that kept him awake.

The question that agitated his mind was whether Evelyn could possibly have instigated her uncle's visit or been aware of it. Cradeley had implied that he was acting on her behalf. Had she, or had she not, authorised him to do so? Did she know of his intention to call? Knowing her as he did, he believed her incapable of the one and ignorant of the other. But discover the truth of the matter he must, and from herself.

Nice feeling, discretion, scrupulousness, honesty of purpose—all had had their share in making him

refrain from pursuing a friendship that had become very dear to him. Now, circumstances had arisen forcing on him the necessity of renewing it.

Not until it was borne in on him that he must get into touch with her on the morrow, if possible, was he able to rest.

CHAPTER XIII

JOYCE's overnight failure to draw Denys was her first waking thought. She was in a spiteful mood. Moreover, she was out of her depth.

What precisely had passed between her husband and his visitor she did not know. Their talk through the closed door of the studio had been difficult to follow. All she had been able to gather from it was that it had to do with some girl and Euzentern. She had distinctly heard the name of that place and immediately jumped to the conclusion that the girl was the one Denys had left at Victoria. On the strength of those limited items of evidence she had tackled Denys and been discomfited.

She was not going to take her rebuff lying down. If Denys wouldn't own up to an implied discretion she might get confirmation of it from his visitor. Who was he, though? Where did he live? What was his name? She raised herself on her pillow perpending these problems. She had overlooked them. But how stupid of her! Of course Mary would know his name. She must have taken it to

Denys last night. Joyce pressed the electric bell by her bedside.

Mary made her appearance with a well-filled breakfast-tray and prepared to place it across her mistress's knees. Joyce repudiated it with a grimace. She had no appetite. Last night, as Denys had surmised she would, she had gone for nepenthe to the whisky decanter.

"Take it away, Mary," she shuddered. "I only want a cup of tea."

While this was being poured out, she said:

"Oh, by the way, what did you say was the name of the gentleman who called last night?"

"I didn't say, m'm. He didn't give it. He said it was no use, as Mr. Stoughton wouldn't know it."

"Oh!"

This was a set-back. If Mary didn't know, the only other person who did was Denys. She would have to get it out of him. Could she? She was dubious, but she'd have a try, anyhow. After last night's scene it wouldn't be easy. Still . . . a plan—a sheerly feminine plan—shaped itself in her mind.

"Take the breakfast away, Mary," she said. "And tell Mr. Stoughton I'm going to stay in bed. I don't feel well."

She really looked ill when Denys came up half an hour later to enquire after her. She had employed the interval in banishing every vestige of colour from her face. It was blanched; so were her lips. Under her eyes there were dark shadows; her cheeks seemed

to have fallen in. She was a ghastly sight. And the effect had been so easy to create by means of the many creams and unguents on her dressing-table. Joyce hadn't been an actress for nothing.

Denys was really shocked by her appearance. His annoyance with her was forgotten.

"You look pretty bad, my dear," he said. "Would you like me to ring up the doctor?"

Languidly she replied: "No, thank you, Denys. I shall be all right soon, I think. It's only . . ."

"Only what? Better tell me."

Two big tears gathered in her eyes and trickled down her wan cheeks.

"My own fault." The murmured reply was brimful of remorse. "I mean about last night. I'm sorry. I oughtn't to have——"

Indulgently he cut her short.

"That's all right, Joyce. Let's forget it."

She turned contrite eyes on him. Her hand—feeble and limp—came across the coverlet in search of his. He took it.

"I behaved badly. But really I wasn't eaves-dropping. I went into the garden because I didn't like the look of that man who came last night. I saw him in the hall while he was waiting. And I thought . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, I couldn't help wondering why he stayed so long with you in the studio. It made me nervous.

I thought something had happened. That he—that you were in some danger." Joyce put a lot of convincing anxiety into the last words.

Denys, rendered unsuspicious by her ghastly appearance and ever prone to heed feminine fears, hastened to comfort her.

"You needn't have worried, my dear. I wasn't in the least danger, I can assure you. And, if I had been, I should have known how to take care of myself."

"Still . . ." She pursed her lips dubiously.

"There, there! Think no more about it."

"But I can't *help* thinking. That man! He had such a horrible face! Downright wicked!"

"He was certainly no beauty. But you have nothing to fear from him. He's not likely to show up again."

"You never can tell," she replied with a thoughtful frown. "Suppose he did and you were out. I should be fearfully upset. . . . Not to know who he was, or what he wanted!"

Denys, off his guard, protested:

"Oh, come! With a telephone in the house you can always call up the police, if you have to. Not that the necessity is likely to arise."

"But what use would the telephone be? I don't even know his name. What was it?"

Just for an instant discretion bade him withhold it. But why should he? She wouldn't be able to gather anything from the name alone. Her request, inspired

by foolish fears, was evidently undesigned. Somewhat wearied by what he regarded as her trivial reasoning, he gave it.

"Cradeley."

With closed eyes she asked: "Where does he live?"

"I really don't know," he answered truthfully. "Come, Joyce! You're troubling your head about all this quite unnecessarily. I must get back to my work. You're looking a bit better. I hope you'll soon be all right again."

He patted her hand and left the room.

Downstairs, he stood before the hall telephone for awhile. No, it wouldn't do to use his own instrument for oral communication with Evelyn. Joyce had sharp ears. He went out, leaving the house by the garden gate on his way to a public call-office in the vicinity. There, on getting connected with 'Highfield,' he was informed by an unknown voice that Miss Stanton had just gone out and wasn't likely to be back before dinner-time. Denys had perforce to replace the receiver and leave the box.

At least one thing was established: Evelyn was still at the Harrington Gardens boarding-house. After much cogitation he decided to write her a note asking her to meet him at one o'clock on the following day at Charing Cross Station and take lunch with him. This he did at a near-by stationer's. In a postscript he took the precaution of telling her not to reply unless she was unable to keep the appointment,

in which case she was to telegraph the one word "Sorry," without any signature. He posted the letter on his way home.

Meanwhile, Joyce had only waited until she heard his footsteps on the garden path and, as she thought, the closing of the studio door. Then she rang for Mary and demanded the Post Office Directory. When it was brought she opened it with a complacent smile. Over-confidence made her assume that she would have no difficulty in locating the Cradeley she wanted and also his address, so carefully suppressed by Denys.

But her smile faded away as she scanned the longish list of Cradeleys in the volume. There were no less than eleven of them. Cradeleys of all sorts—a baker, a doctor, a furniture-remover, a printers'-ink manufacturer, a jeweller, several of no specified occupation and a theatrical agent. Him she completely ignored. He was the last sort of person with whom Denys would have dealings. True she had seen the one she wanted and would recognise him again; but that didn't help her much. He might not be included in the list; he might even not be resident in London. And was she to call on the whole eleven in turn? In dismay, she pictured the reception they would give her; the expression on their faces. What, for instance, might not an irascible manufacturer of printers' ink do or say if she went into her private affairs with him? He might lay his black and smelly fingers on her!

"Damn!" she ejaculated, pitching the directory away

CHAPTER XIV

TWENTY minutes before the appointed hour of his rendezvous with Evelyn at Charing Cross, Denys was pacing up and down the space between the two book-stalls. His gaze was ever on the clock. Its hands seemed stuck, so slowly did it record the minutes. Once he thought it must have altogether stopped.

He tried to while away the time by looking at the display of picture-papers and coloured advertisements. He smoked cigarettes at a furious rate. He strode from one entrance of the station to another, searching them for sight of Evelyn. He got into the way of people hurrying to catch trains; he was jostled by porters and nearly upset by high-heaped luggage trucks.

One o'clock came, but no Evelyn. Denys' heart sank. Had she not received his letter? Was she detained? Was she not coming? In an agony of anxiety and impatience he pictured her as the victim of a street accident.

And then he felt a touch on his arm and she was close to him, startling him by her sudden emergence from the surrounding crowd.

"Evelyn!" he gulped. And then: "My dear!"

She smiled at him. "I'm late, Denys. I'm so sorry. It wasn't my fault. The bus couldn't get down Piccadilly, you know."

"Lord, what does it matter now you're here! I was afraid——" He changed gear. "You look—splendid. Come along. Let's get out of this. Where would you like to lunch?"

"Anywhere you like. It's all the same to me."

"All right then."

He steered her down an exit, held up a taxi that had just discharged a fare, and bundled her into it.

"Frith Street. The Shaftesbury Avenue end," he told the driver.

Inside the cab he sat up and let his eyes take their fill of her. She was her own sweet self, and yet somehow he was aware of some subtle change in her.

"Is it my face?" she asked uneasily. "Oh, Denys dear, don't say you don't like it!"

"Not like what? Your face is—lovelier than ever."

"I'm so glad you think so. So it ought to be," she gurgled. "Don't you see I've taken to powder and a lip-stick."

"Why?"

"Force of example And on the advice of a girl I know. I use those aids to beauty with discretion, I hope. Oh, Denys, I'm so frightfully glad to see you again. I was getting afraid you'd forgotten me."

"Nonsense! I've been busy, that's all."

The taxi had turned into Frith Street. Denys rapped on the window, signalling that he wanted it to stop. It pulled up opposite a small Italian restaurant. Evelyn liked the look of it when they got inside. It had a certain daintiness.

After selecting a table against the wall of a narrow inner room and giving his order to a waiter, Denys began cogitating over the best way of broaching the disquieting topic of Cradeley's visit.

"You're worried about something," she said.

"I am a little," he nodded. "It'll keep, though, till we've finished lunch. Now, tell me, are you comfortable at 'Highfield'? Any signs of a job?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. You see, it's the old trouble we threshed out in Ostend. I'm so completely unqualified. I haven't been idle, though. I've been looking about, and I've had a lot of help from the girl I mentioned. She's staying at 'Highfield' too. It was lucky for me that I made friends with her, or rather that she made friends with me."

Denys' look of interrogation drew from her an account of her first meeting with Iris and the singular evening's entertainment at Skindle's that followed it.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Sounds grotesque. You'd better not let this Miss Brown lead you into any more complications of the kind."

"She's really a darling," she assured him; and throughout an appetising lunch told him of the

theatres, dances and other outings which, but for Iris's good nature, she would have missed. A reference to Iris's situation in the City brought Denys back to the question of her own chances of earning a living.

"Oh, I shall manage," she assured him. "There's the stage if nothing better turns up. I can always count on my uncle to get me into the chorus of some touring piece."

Unconsciously she had provided him with the cue he wanted. He said:

"By the way, I had a visit a couple of nights ago from your uncle."

The expression of amazement that came into her face assured him definitely and finally that she had been no party to that visit.

"From Uncle Bob?" she echoed blankly. "What on earth . . ."

Words failed her. They almost failed him. How was he to begin? And yet he had to tell her of the man's scoundrelism, if only to put her on her guard against him.

"I'll try and explain. First, do you remember the tall, fair Englishman who stared at you at the Hotel Beffroi?"

"Yes, and how exceedingly rude I thought him Now I come to think of it he looked like an actor."

"I expect he is. It probably accounts for his being acquainted with your uncle. It appears that he has been talking about us—making certain

insinuations. I would rather not specify of what kind. Perhaps you can guess."

The colour flowed into Evelyn's face. But she valiantly answered :

"Yes. But, oh, how shameful!"

"That aspect of it didn't seem to strike your uncle. As a matter of fact, the object of his visit was solely confined to making a demand for reparation—on your behalf—a monetary consideration in settlement of the damage I had done to your reputation."

"How perfectly disgusting! I do hope you didn't——"

"No; he not only got a point blank refusal from me but some active help off my premises. In fact, I'm afraid I rather man-handled him."

"Oh, good!" she breathed, clapping her hands.

"What I can't quite make out is how he got hold of my name."

"Certainly not from me. I haven't seen him, I'm thankful to say, since my return. I did tell Aunt Emmeline, though, about how good you were to me in enabling me to get home—and—and about the stupid mistake at the hotel. But I'm certain I didn't mention your name. That Englishman must have heard it, or perhaps seen it in the visitors' book. What an odious cad! I *am* so sorry, Denys. I'm ashamed that I, who owe you nothing but gratitude, should have got you involved in a horrid annoyance like this. It's a poor return for all you've done for me."

Unutterable distress was in her face. In haste, Denys did his best to mitigate it.

"My dear girl, you've nothing whatever to reproach yourself with. I suppose I'm a blundering fool to have told you about your uncle. I only did so to put you on your guard. We can't be sure of what he's exactly up to. If he writes or says anything to you about his interview with me, you'd better let him know that you disapprove of it."

She fired up. "I will indeed! I'll do more than disapprove. I'll tell him that he's acted disgracefully."

"Well, anyhow, we're sufficiently good friends not to let his exhibition of bad taste affect us. Don't let us give him another thought. Here come the strawberries. Late, but still welcome, I hope."

"Lovely! What is the flavour in the cream?"

"Maraschino."

"You do give me delicious things to eat, Denys. You'll turn me into a positive gourmet."

"I'll give you something rather good with your coffee. An Italian liqueur called Strega. They keep it here. I got a taste for it when I was studying in Rome."

He looked about the room to catch the waiter's attention, and in so doing intercepted the gaze of his friend Wingfield, who was sitting at its further end. There was an exchange of hand-waves. Presently Wingfield left his table and approached theirs.

"I'm going to introduce you to one of the best

portrait painters we have," Denys whispered. " Hugh Wingfield, the R.A. One of my oldest friends."

The introduction duly made, he invited the artist to pull a chair up to the table

" Odd that I didn't catch sight of you before, Hugh," he said.

" Not at all." Wingfield shot a smile accompanied by a gallant bow in Evelyn's direction. " You had something better to occupy your attention."

The waiter came with the Strega. When the three glasses were filled with the golden-coloured liqueur, Denys lifted his.

" Do you remember this, Hugh ? It must have been in nineteen-ten that we first discovered its merits ; in those happy days before the war when everything tasted so much better than it does now."

" Ah, in 'the brave days when we were twenty-one.' Don't blame the war for all your blunted tastes." Again Wingfield's admiring glance went to Evelyn. " There's one, at least, that you haven't lost."

Evelyn smiled at the implied compliment to herself ; Denys because it gratified him.

" I suppose you're right. How's the portrait going on ? "

" It isn't." Wingfield lifted his hands in a gesture of despair. " Sacha has got an engagement in Paris at the Theatre des Champs Elysées, and the whole thing's hung up indefinitely. Simply maddening ! The portrait's half finished. I've been searching all

London for a model to take her place—for the hands and arms, that is—and I can't find one."

"I know," Denys nodded. "Hugh is speaking of Sacha Moniakov," he explained to Evelyn. "The Russian dancer. He's painting her in the costume she wore in 'Les Sylphides.'" He turned again to Wingfield. "If you can only get it finished it ought to be one of the best things you've done; unless, of course, you've gone and messed it up since I last saw it."

"Haven't touched it for over a month. How the deuce could I without——" Wingfield subsided abruptly. His eyes wavered uncertainly between the faces to right and left of him. "Is it permissible," he inquired suddenly, "to make a suggestion to Miss Stanton?"

"I can guess what it is," smiled Denys. "I don't think she'll mind."

Evelyn wondered what was coming.

"Thanks. I'll just preface it by the assurance that what I'm about to say is meant with all respect. Please don't think me impertinent, Miss Stanton, but seeing you with Denys, I've been asking myself whether you've ever done any posing."

"Never."

"Just my luck! If you only had, all my troubles would have been at an end. Assuming, of course, that you'd have been willing to sit to me. You are of just about the same proportions as the Moniakov; and your hands and arms—oh, yes, I confess I've been

observing them—are a lot better than hers." He finished with a crestfallen sigh.

"But how can you tell what my arms are like when I'm wearing sleeves?"

He made an airy gesture. "Painters see everything."

"And most of 'em don't do justice to what they see," chuckled Denys. "Like me."

"Is it very difficult, being a model?" Evelyn asked.

"It's not easy," Wingfield admitted. "And painters are exacting; sometimes rather forgetful of the fact that their models are human beings. That's so, isn't it, Denys? But experience isn't absolutely necessary. If it were, one couldn't paint people's portraits, you know."

"I'll sit to you, Mr. Wingfield, if it's only for the hands and arms."

He sat up in delighted surprise.

"You mean it? You really will? . . . A thousand thanks." He began talking excitedly. "I should want you to wear Sacha Moniakov's costume. I have it in my studio. Painters don't always need figure models, Miss Stanton. I should understand your reluctance if I asked you to pose for the figure. Still, believe me there's nothing at all degrading about serving the cause of Art in that way. Many nice women do it without sacrificing their self-respect or forfeiting that of other people."

Evelyn had taken instinctively to Wingfield. His sincerity of purpose was unmistakable. Somehow in the

company of these two men she realised that there is an essential difference between the arts and the professions; that painting is a vocation which demands the sacrifice of self in the pursuit of beauty. She had heard a good deal about artists' models, Bohemian life and all the rest of it, and it had not impressed her favourably But she could not connect Wingfield or Denys with any of the unpleasant aspects of studio work. On the contrary, she caught through them a glimpse of the real seriousness of their calling.

"I'm afraid you must think I'm rather benighted, Mr. Wingfield," she said; "but, you see, the whole idea is quite new to me."

"Of course. Talk it over with friend Denys here," he replied, rising to his feet. "And do whatever he advises you. But I know you'll come. I can't tell you how thankful I am that I've prevailed on you to step into the breach. As soon as I set eyes on you I realised that you were exactly what I've been looking for. Will you ring me up during the day and allay my anxiety? I'd like to begin work at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning—21A, Tite Street. Well, good-bye for the present, Miss Stanton. Denys, old chap, you've been a mascot to me to-day. Consider me your heavy debtor for it."

He shook hands warmly with both of them, and hurried off in high spirits.

Evelyn looked across the table and with feminine irrelevance said: "I *do* think he's a dear!"

Denys smiled. "It's fairly evident that he thinks the same of you. He's not an easy man to please in his choice of models"

"Then you think I ought to go and sit for him?"

"I not only think so, but I feel inclined to kick myself for my folly for not having thought of it myself. *I've* always wanted to paint you, you know. But somehow it never occurred to me that posing to artists was an obvious solution of the job question. I can't think how I could have been so stupid! Of course, it's hard work sometimes very hard. Hugh was quite right when he said that painters sometimes forget their sitters are human. When the working fit is on us, we consider nothing except what we're doing and don't give our models sufficient rest. All the same, you would earn a far better living as a model than as a chorus girl or a typist; and what's more, you'd have a much pleasanter time. Once it gets about that you're sitting to an artist of Hugh's standing you'll always be able to command as much work as you care to accept. By the way, he'll pay you handsomely."

Evelyn's eyes were shining.

"Oh, Denys, just think of it! I've actually got a real job and all through you, my dear! If you want to be an angel you'll ring up Mr. Wingfield for me, and tell him I'll be at his studio to-morrow at eleven sharp. Will you?"

"I was just going to suggest it. I'll also tell him

just enough about you to enable him to realise that you aren't an amateur—doing the thing entirely for fun. But Hugh has evidently taken a liking to you, so I'm quite sure you'll get on well with him. And, apart from the fact that you'll be able to feel you are thoroughly earning all you are paid, there'll also be the satisfaction—I don't know how to express it exactly—of realising that you'll be contributing towards the creation of a work of art. That's something."

Denys would have liked nothing better than to keep her for the rest of the day; for her companionship had lost nothing of its charm. Evelyn in London, indeed, was even more attractive than the shy, disconsolate Evelyn of Euzentern. Unfortunately, he had some people coming to see him at Hampstead, and it was too late to put them off.

They parted outside the restaurant, both singularly happy, not only because of the result of their chance encounter with Wingfield, but infinitely more so on account of their own reunion.

"Good-bye, Evelyn," said Denys. "You'll see me often at Hugh's. We're always dropping in at each other's studios. I'll ring him up and give him the good news as soon as I get home."

Evelyn's glance of sheer affection made his heart leap—for a time, at least. Then he told himself sternly not to be a fool, not to indulge in idle dreams. The hard facts of life were not to be denied. He would find them all at Corner Cottage.

CHAPTER XV

"Eve, I believe you've backed a winner."

It was half-past eight. The two girls were in the lounge having their after-dinner coffee.

"Not in the sense you mean," Evelyn answered.

"Then why that Mona Lisa smile? Sort of secret joy. I jolly well know you've come in for a bit of luck. You fiddled with your dinner, answered at random whenever I spoke to you, and so forth."

"Yes, I confess I hadn't much appetite. Fact is, I had a scrumptious lunch with a man."

Iris settled back in her chair.

"I'm all ears. Go ahead. I say, this is most interesting—from you, Eve. You never talk about men, old thing. Who was this one? The fairy prince with the two thousand horse power Royal-Royce?"

"Nope," Evelyn answered, using an expression of Iris's own. But she felt her colour rising.

"Well, what particular brand of good thing did he put you on to? Was it a gem bracelet or an outfit at Machenka's. No, not that. You'd shy at it. A dead cert for Doncaster perhaps, or a tip about rubber shares?

If it's a secret, keep it to yourself. I shan't mind."

"No, it's not a secret. My dear, I really did have a stroke of luck this afternoon. I've been gloating over it ever since like a miser over a bag of gold. I suppose that's what made me seem *distrait* at dinner. But I'm dying to tell you all the same."

"Shoot! I'm prepared to register all the proper emotions."

"Well, in the first place, this lunch was with a perfect darling of a man who was most awfully good to me in Belgium. I'll tell you all about that another time—perhaps. He's an artist. Also a *dilettante* of good things to eat and drink. He took me to a duck of a restaurant somewhere in Soho. The Vista Vesuvio I think its name is, where they keep a liqueur called Strega that you'd love!"

"Sounds rather like a gastronomic eruption—what? Sorry to erupt—interrupt, I mean."

"No; Isola Bella it's called. I remember now. And a friend of his, another artist who was lunching there as well, came over to our table and I was introduced. And the long and the short of it is, I'm going to sit to him."

Iris tried not to look disappointed. Evelyn's story seemed to have petered out like a damp squib.

"For fun?" she enquired.

"No, professionally."

"You mean you're going to be a giddy model?"

"I'm going to be a model, certainly, but not a

one. The man I'm going to sit to is Hugh Wingfield."

"What? The R.A.? Oh, you sly puss! Been pulling my leg, have you? My dear! You'll have a lovely time and be well paid for it, I expect. Yes, you're quite right in calling it a stroke of luck. Your artist friend must be a top-notcher if he's on familiar terms with the famous Mr. Wingfield."

"He is," Evelyn said emphatically.

"I don't wonder Hugh Wingfield made a dead set at you. I should have if I were an artist. You're just the shape. If he'd seen you in your bath as I have——"

"You cuckoo! I'm not going to sit for the figure."

"*I* wouldn't mind. . . . Good Lord, Eve, you'll be the Queen of Chelsea in two ticks. Swagger models are run after even more than top-hole mannequins. What a good thing you didn't get anything to do in the City. You'll have a dozen chances to my one. Best congrats, old girl."

"Oh come, Iris, you know your work fascinates you. You wouldn't leave it for anything."

Iris gave her a quizzical glance.

"The exercise of my wits and intelligence fascinates me, certainly. But the work itself? I don't know. I've a theory that some women have as much capacity for making money in the City as men. One of these days I may put it to the test. That's the prospect that keeps me in a City office."

"What fun, my dear, if you were to become a financial magnate. I'm sure you could. You manage

difficult situations so awfully well and you're so self-possessed. I'm certain that's half the battle. I should lose my head hopelessly in any business matter. I can't even multiply beyond ten without counting on my fingers."

"There's nothing in that." An expression of earnestness, almost absorption, came into Iris's face. "Figures are not the chief thing in business. I've come across big men in the city who can't count their change correctly. What gives a financial genius the pull is his ability to see further than other men; to be able to come to quick decisions; to take big risks; and above all never to let his conscience worry him. I'm thinking of the coups that bring in thousands. Very few women, I admit, have consciences to make a song about, but their minds are so beastly small. Look at their mean little ways of making money. They cheat at cards. All the kleptomaniacs are women. They think nothing of sneaking one another's umbrellas and furs. I've known women artists who spy in studios for compositions for their pictures. I've even heard of a woman novelist with no imagination of her own who steals plots out of another author's books."

She paused thoughtfully. Evelyn did not interrupt.

"I hate all those petty frauds. They prejudice men against us. But the ridiculous superstition that trained women can't control great undertakings, or at least devise them, is imbecile. Look at Lady Rhondda! Look at the way French women run big

businesses! Look at Elizabeth Marbury, the American dramatic agent! I could do the things they do if I got the chance."

She spoke with a fire of conviction that surprised Evelyn. It was difficult for her to reconcile this dainty creature with her painted mouth, Coty-creamed face and "improved" eyebrows with the ambitions to which she had just confessed.

"And yet, why not?" Evelyn argued to herself. "A man isn't less masculine because he devotes himself to his job; then why should a woman be less feminine because she does the same? All women are not necessarily fitted for domesticity, any more than all men are fitted to be husbands and fathers. I can't help sympathising with Iris, although I know my temperament is fundamentally different from hers. I'm certainly more inclined towards matrimony than money-making." Aloud she said: "I'm going to make a guess, Iris, just as you did about me. Something's happened at your office to make you so hot about the handicap women have to put up with in the city. Am I right?"

Iris gave her a sideways look, and then a whimsical smile.

"Not far out. The fact is, I spotted a good thing in under-valued shares to-day and made a present of it to my governor. He told me I didn't know what I was talking about." She hitched her lithe shoulders. "However, the day's coming when I shall catch Sir Alfred—napping. And I don't think it's very far off either," she added prophetically.

PART III

Part Three

CHAPTER I

WITH her incursion into the world of Art Evelyn began a new life—new by reason of its action and transaction, its earnestness, its atmosphere of high endeavour, its colour. Here was nothing of the pettiness of human nature or the craftiness of business against which Iris had railed so bitterly.

And she dropped into it as though to the manner born. True she found that holding a pose—and especially the one that Wingfield required of her—was a trial of endurance. But she stuck it out valiantly and after a few days became accustomed to it. Reward followed quickly.

"Do you know," Wingfield said at the end of that period, "you're something exceptional in the way of models. I'm not flattering you. You have a feeling for your job. You're quick to see what one wants and quick to give it. That's of infinitely more value to the artist than the practised but spiritless facility of the experienced professional model. I don't remember when I worked with such ease and rapidity."

She rejoiced at his praise and strove the harder to

deserve it. He was so easy to get on with. He treated her with affable courtesy. After the first day or two he addressed her as Evelyn or Eve; but to fellow artists who dropped in at his vast and fine studio he referred to her, conformably with professional habit, as "Stanton," without any prefix.

And as "Stanton" she was soon at home with a goodly number of these, women as well as men. The *cachet* she got from Wingfield's employment would alone have been sufficient to establish her in the ranks of modeldom; but she soon earned esteem on her own account. She was treated as an equal, invited about, offered intimacies by the women and made love to by the men. She accepted the intimacies equably and gladly; the love-making, flattering as it was from men eminent in Art, she controlled with a pretty discretion that quelled their ardour without decreasing any of their amiable *camaraderie*.

But none of these new friendships touched the high-water mark of the one she reserved to Denys. Her feeling towards him was an emotion apart. He was and would always remain her *preux chevalier*. She was humble and proud when—out of what seemed the princely wage that Wingfield paid her—she was able to discharge her debt to her benefactor.

She did not see much of Denys at this period. He was busy with work of his own. He did not ignore her or suppress a constant hankering for her. But he knew by hearsay that she was establishing herself in

the new environment in which she was earning a living, and he did not wish to jeopardise her prospects by importunities of his own.

When they did meet it was invariably while she was posing, and private converse between them was then necessarily impracticable. After acknowledging the receipt of the money from her he never made any further allusion to it. It was a sore subject. He had been compelled to accept repayment. He knew she would have been humiliated had he refused it, much as he desired to.

What little he did see of her, however, gladdened him greatly. Observing her as he did with the intentness of affection, he missed nothing of the rapid growth and development she exhibited. The change wrought in her by independence and its consequent content seemed little short of miraculous. She was like a rosebud warmed by June sunshine that bursts suddenly into flower. Every time they met she seemed to have added something to herself in charm and gaiety. He could hardly recognise her as the harassed and friendless girl whom he had discovered at the Hotel Beffroi six short weeks ago.

This change in her was not surprising. More than usually endowed as she was with good looks, unselfishness and lack of "side," she was courted and made much of by everybody in Wingfield's circle. Besides Stephen Hollins, two other men, Venables and Carter, mutual friends of Denys as well as Hugh, did their

best to make life pleasant to her. At studio dances and informal "rags" she was in great request. She gave her full share of help at such entertainments. Venables at three o'clock one morning, after a dance at Hollins' studio, watching her concocting welsh rarebit and cooking eggs and bacon, exclaimed:

"By Jove, what a wife that girl would make!"

Carter was also admiring her. The white overall she had slipped on over her dance frock added to her aspect of dexterity.

"Yes," concurred Carter. "Reminds me of those 'certified brides' you read about. Domestically qualified to make a man comfortable, you know."

Iris, at Evelyn's special desire, had been present on the occasion and proved herself a welcome guest. Her liveliness and whimsical ways were altogether to the liking of these unconventional people. Thereafter "Brown" was an established favourite with them.

Evelyn's own popularity was not confined to the men. She got on equally well with her own sex. When Wingfield could spare her she posed to some of them—serious workers—for the figure. She had come to realise more clearly the painter's standpoint, and her earlier reluctance to exhibit herself in the nude now seemed cheap and unworthy. In place of that phase of self-consciousness she took pride in being able to contribute towards the creation of a work of beauty.

Certified as a bride Evelyn might or might not be But she had passed her novitiate as an aid to Art.

Part Three

CHAPTER II

MID-AUGUST was laying its hot hand on London. The Moniakov picture, delayed by that erratic lady's absence in Paris, had kept Wingfield longer in town than he had anticipated. Now that it was finished, all but a final touch or two, the country and a well-earned rest were calling him. Standing before his canvas one afternoon he said:

"I shall be off to Cornwall in a day or two. What are you going to do with yourself while I'm away, Eve?"

She was putting on her hat prior to taking her departure.

"I haven't thought about it," she answered. "Mrs. Jalland wants me to sit to her for her 'Cigale.' I might——"

"You want a rest as much as I do," he interposed. "How would you like to come down to St. Bridget's?"

"I'd love it. Is there some place, not too expensive, where I could stay?"

"You wouldn't be at any expense." Wingfield was not looking at her. He was dabbing with his

brush here and there. "Carter and Venables have a spare room at their place. They're going down, too. They'll put you up."

"Did they say so?"

"Yes, they asked me to speak to you about it."

"It's awfully kind of them."

Wingfield emitted a grunt. It sounded dissident.

"Considering that you'd be conferring an obligation on them, I don't see where the kindness comes in." He put his palette down and faced her. "I'd be glad to give you house room myself if I could, Eve. Unfortunately I can't. I've only got a studio with one bedroom and a kitchen. A reconstructed fisherman's cottage. There's Hollins; but he'll be at the local inn."

Although he put no emphasis on either Hollins' name or the word "inn," Evelyn surmised that what he meant to imply was the unsuitability of one or the other. It must be the inn, she thought; for of course Stephen Hollins was a dear.

"Well, what about it?" he resumed. "We shall stay over September. You'll be all right with Venables and Carter. That is, if you care to do without a chaperone. If you know of one, they could put her up as well."

"*I* don't want a chaperone, Hugh," she protested. "You don't really think I ought to have one, do you?"

"Lord, no! Still, if you'd like another woman for

company bring her along by all means. You'd be left to yourself at times, you know. How about that cheery creature Iris Brown ?"

"Yes, I should like her ! But she's in a city office and I don't know whether she could manage it at such short notice. I'll ask her directly she gets home this evening, though."

"Why not ask her now ? There's the telephone. Call her up. Do you know the number ?"

"No, but I'll soon find it." She went to the book and looked it up. "Here it is. Napp and Shweigelberg, Lothbury. B, double o, eight."

She lifted the receiver off the hook, asked for the number and waited. Presently a voice said :

"Hullo ! Who's speaking ?"

"Evelyn Stanton. Please put me through to Miss Iris Brown."

"Who ?"

"Iris Brown," repeated Evelyn.

"Yes, yes, I heard that," said the voice testily. "It's your name I want."

Evelyn gave it again very distinctly, adding her Harrington Gardens address.

"Well, what is it ?"

"Just a private message. Can't you put me through to her ?"

"No, I can't. It's against the rules of this office for employees to make use of the telephone for private purposes."

"But *I'm* not one of its employees," Evelyn retorted sharply.

"No, but *she* is. Hurry up now. I'm busy."

"Who *are* you?"

"I'm Sir Alfred Napp, if you must know."

"Oh!" she gasped. "It—it doesn't matter. Thank you."

As she replaced the receiver, she caught a muffled word or two of exasperation. She turned to Wingfield.

"I can't get on to her." She gave a little nervous laugh. "It was her employer, Sir Alfred Napp, who answered me. He seemed rather annoyed. I hope he won't vent it on her."

"Well, let me know in the morning so that I can arrange."

Although it was only four o'clock and Iris wouldn't be back from the city until six, Evelyn went off on flying feet. Wingfield's invitation had come as a joyful surprise. A night or two ago, she and Iris had been discussing the possibility of putting in a fortnight at some seaside place. They had gone into ways and means. Now Evelyn would get her holiday free of expense, except for the cost of a railway ticket, and under the pleasantest conditions possible. If only Iris could manage to come with her she also would be saving money. Evelyn dearly wanted to do her that good turn. She had an impatient hour's wait in her bedroom before she heard light steps at the top of the stairs. She was at the door in a moment.

"Is that you, Iris?" she called.

"Yep. Coming."

"In here. I've got something to tell you."

"And I've got something to tell *you*," said Iris, as she entered the bedroom and flopped down on the bed. Her eyes were twinkling. "A message from the great Sir Alfred. I hope you're duly flattered."

"About my telephone call?" Evelyn asked anxiously.

"Just that. In fact I've got *two* messages from him. One is that he objects to back-chat from his clerk's friends. Back-chat's not the word he used. He called it 'damned impertinence.'"

"I'm awfully sorry. Of course I didn't know——"

"Oh, that's all right. It doesn't matter a tuppenny ticket. I was out when you rang up. What upset him was your breaking in just as he was expecting a trunk call. Of course he let out at me when I came in. Had to blow off steam and sustain his dignity, you know."

"What's the other message?"

Iris lay back on the bed, squirming with laughter.

"Th—that he b-begs your ladyship's pardon!"

"Ladyship?—begs my——"

"Yes, I really couldn't help it! When he demanded—oh, you would have screamed at the high and mighty stop he pulled out—who the woman was who dared to call me up in office hours. I *had* to get back on him." Her gurgling fit began again.

"S-so I s-said you were Lady Evelyn Stanton and that probably all you w-wanted to know was

whether I could get away for a week's grouse s-shooting on your North Berwick moor!"

"But"—Evelyn hesitated between a howl of laughter and amazement at the fiction—"but did he believe that?"

"Swallowed it like a fish swallows bait. I can be very convincing when I want to. Besides, he deserved it. After all, it wasn't much of an exaggeration considering you're already the Queen of Chelsea."

In wonder Evelyn murmured: "How you could have had the cheek!"

"Only tact, my dear. Well, what's *your* news?"

"I've got an invitation for you. A holiday in Cornwall." Evelyn went into details. "You'll come, won't you?" she asked in conclusion.

Iris looked vexed. "How disgustingly disappointing! This very afternoon, just before I left the office, I arranged to take my three weeks off at the beginning of next month. There are over a dozen of us and we have to fit in. I can't possibly alter things now. I could have if only I'd been in when you 'phoned! What infernal luck!"

"But you could come later on. We're going to stay at St. Bridget's over September."

"As long as that? Then I *could* come, if they'll have me. Say on the seventh. I breathe again. Fix it for me, darling. How I envy you Six whole weeks' holiday! A solitary Eve in the Garden of Eden! And with four nice Adams!"

CHAPTER III

THE Moniakov picture being finished, Evelyn only went to the studio next day to ascertain whether Iris's suggestion of coming down to St. Bridget's later on would be agreeable to her two hosts. She found them, and Hollins as well, with Wingfield. They had come to inspect the portrait prior to its stowage away pending exhibition at next year's Academy. Of course they wrangled over it, as intimate artists have a way of doing, criticising this and eulogising that and keeping up an incessant jargon about values, line, balance, symmetry and such-like technicalities. But through it all there was the note of high appreciation, the final words of commendation being " Jolly good work," " Damn fine," and " You're getting on, Hugh ! "

Evelyn's own plans were disposed of in a couple of minutes. Iris, they assured her, would be very welcome whenever she cared to come. She, herself, was to meet them at Paddington Station at a specified hour next morning. Clothes didn't matter so long as she brought a bathing costume ; but if she liked to include a cookery book as well, so much the better. The " old

party " who did their housekeeping hadn't an idea of culinary processes beyond the frying of a chop or the boiling of an egg.

In Tite Street on her way out Evelyn almost ran into the arms of Denys. He was going at a great rate and looked eager. After greetings he said:

" Jove, I'm glad I didn't miss you."

" You look as if something had happened, Denys."

" No, nothing. But Hugh 'phoned me an hour ago to say that he was off to Cornwall in the morning and that you were going too. So I hurried along to see whether you felt inclined to put in a few hours with me before you left."

" You might have been sure there's nothing I should like better. What do you propose we shall do ? "

They had turned towards the Embankment. Evelyn tripped blithely along with her hand tucked under his arm.

" What about the river ? Just the day for a punt and an *al fresco* dinner. I thought perhaps Marlow or Maidenhead——"

" No, not there," she interposed hurriedly. " If you mean Skindle's, I've ' had some ' already. Don't you remember ? "

" Yes, I forgot. Suppose we say Staines, then. There's a decent pub. there—the Packhorse. It won't take us as long to get there, either. That do ? Right. Then we'll make for Waterloo. Here's a taxi."

Along the Embankment they bowled, caught a

non-stop train, and in a little over an hour Denys was paddling her away from the Packhorse landing-stage in a smartly cushioned punt. The river, in its mid-week quietude, was comparatively empty of small craft.

"How deliciously peaceful it is," murmured Evelyn. "I feel as if I were in a cradle and being gently rocked to sleep."

"There's a shady backwater a short way up where you can have forty winks if you want to."

But when they reached it and the punt was tied up to a willow stump Evelyn no longer had any inclination for sleep. A deep contentment enveloped her. This was the first occasion since her return from Belgium that she and Denys had been quite alone together. All the memories of those trying days in Euzentern and the serene ones in Ostend were back in her mind. She felt unaccountably drawn to him.

And he, stretched beside her, was equally full of similar memories, satisfied at having recaptured the best of them and herself as well for a few brief hours.

It was the most he could ever look for—an occasional and fleeting opportunity to have her entirely to himself and make believe that his yearning for her was nearing gratification. Dreams, of course. But dreams with her so close were infinitely more precious than the best of realities apart from her. He hadn't any right to tell her how dear she was to him.

If she guessed his secret he couldn't help it. It did him no discredit, nor did it dishonour her. Soon she would be married and no doubt be quite happy. Why should he cause her needless distress by the declaration of a passion which never could be consummated.

And that brought him to Hugh Wingfield and Stephen Hollins. They, bachelors both, were in love with her of course. The indications of it were plain enough. Rivals for her favour. He had been aware of it for some time. An honest rivalry, but none the less a cheerless one—a bitter commentary on his own disability to win her.

His talk that morning over the 'phone with Hugh had confirmed his fear that he was about to lose her. Ostensibly, Hugh had only wanted to know when he might be expected to join the party at St. Bridget's; but when that enquiry had been followed by what seemed an over-casual announcement that Evelyn was to be the guest of Venables and Carter, his eyes had been opened to the fact that thereby Hugh and Stephen would be disallowing one another an advantage with her. In reality, they were both in a position to give her house room. On consideration, that knowledge somewhat ameliorated Denys' dejection.

"You'll like St. Bridget's," he mumbled grudgingly.

"Tell me about it."

"There's nothing quite like it in Cornwall. It's all very queer and foreign, and rather wild. You can

work and you can laze. There's the sea, the rocks, the quaint cottages, the fishing fleet, the wind-swept clumps of trees—all eminently paintable. Golden sands to lie about on. Ozone to breathe in." He trailed off in meditation.

"Hugh said you would be coming down, Denys. When?"

"I don't quite know. I have one or two commissions to complete. Think you'll like staying with Carter and Venables?"

"I'm sure I shall. The dear big babies! I shall be able to look after them. Darn their socks and sew their buttons on."

"They're good chaps. . . . How about Stephen and Hugh?"

"How do you mean?"

"You don't regard *them* as babies, do you?"

"Well, no." She lay considering. "They're more—sophisticated." She laughed softly. "No, you couldn't think of Hugh as an infant. He always strikes me as rather grand—imposing and dignified, you know."

Denys, twirling a sprig of willow in an absent manner, nodded.

"And Stephen?"

"Oh, I don't know. Rather intense at times. He looks at you as though he wanted to eat you. But artists nearly all do that."

"Do I?"

"Not now," she smiled. "But you know you did scrutinise me pretty severely that first day at the Hote Beffroi, when I pushed your door open."

"Wanted to paint you," he made excuse, reddening a little. "Like a cigarette?"

She took one and for a while they silently smoked.

"Have you seen anything of your uncle?" Denys asked.

"No; and I don't want to. Since you told me about him I've purposely kept away from their flat. Once he called at 'Highfield' and asked for me, but I wouldn't see him. I told the maid to say I was out. . . . Denys, you never tell me anything about yourself. Why don't you? Is that an indiscreet question like the one I put about your wife when we were in Ostend?"

He turned troubled eyes on her.

"I hope I didn't convey that. I didn't think it indiscreet then, nor do I of your present question. I wish I could answer it as fully as you do all mine. All I can tell you about myself is summed up in very few words. I work, I eat and I sleep. I have a fair number of friends and, as far as I know, no enemies, with the possible exception of your uncle. I go about very little, and nothing, in consequence, happens to me. A rather colourless picture I'm afraid; but it's true to life."

For a moment or two she regarded him with compassionate gravity. Then a very sweet smile came into her face.

"You've brought a lot of colour into *my* life, Denys. Can't you catch a little of its reflection for yourself?"

Her hand lay close to one of his. He gave it a slight pressure.

"I do, my dear. You brighten up every moment when I'm with you. And my thoughts when I'm away from you," he added after an appreciable pause.

"I'm glad of that."

She said no more, and after a little they drifted into commonplace talk. Gradually Denys repressed his feelings. After all, what had he to complain of? He had her to himself for a short while. He could see her whenever he wanted to. He would soon be with her down at St. Bridget's. The Fates were not altogether against him.

At tea-time they dropped down to the bridge, landed and had that meal by the waterside. Afterwards Denys helped her into the punt again and shot down stream. Something impelled him to violent exertion. A couple of miles below the town he turned and, pole in hand, began the struggle back against the fast-running current, straining his muscles as though his very life depended on making headway. The more he tried them the more he calmed his nerves. He was in a healthy glow when he brought the punt to rest at the Roebuck landing-stage, and correspondingly hungry.

A little later, invigorated by a rest and a wash, he was sitting opposite Evelyn at an open window of the

dining-room, through which they could look out at the tree-shaded velvety lawn sloping to the river's edge. Knowing the scene well as he did, it struck him as very English. He said something to that effect.

"Yes," she agreed; "and this old-fashioned hotel as well."

"The deep-rooted affability of an old civilisation: mellow and cosy. There's nothing quite like it in the States. I've got an old-fashioned appetite too. I hope you have."

He passed the menu to her.

"I should like something cold," she said, studying it.

"Pickled salmon—a young grouse—salad—cold cherry pie—cream, all very English. How will that do?"

"Splendidly."

"And to drink?"

"Lemon squash, please—with ice in it."

"And for me beer—a pint of bitter in a tankard," he informed the waiter.

The sun was setting when they finished. Looking at the paling sky, Evelyn said:

"The colour's fading."

Denys tapped his breast. "It remains here."

His other hand lay on the table. Hers went out impulsively and clasped it.

"Oh, my dear, I've had such a happy day!" she whispered.

They journeyed back to town in the cool of the evening. When Denys left her at her door she put up her face to be kissed.

Many a hero has had less reward.

CHAPTER IV

FOR days Joyce Stoughton smarted under her failure to get to the bottom of the Cradeley mystery. More than ever was she out of humour with Denys and in revolt against the sequestered quiet of Hampstead. There were so many things she wanted to do outside it. She had grown to hate its distance from the central heart-beat of London. Hampstead had been all very well while the novelty of married life lasted, but for long now she had hankered after the vehemence of her unwedded days. In a word, she longed to get back to the stage.

Before her marriage Joyce had reached a fair degree of success in her profession. She had played leading parts on tour and appeared with credit in minor rôles in a number of London productions. She had married when her professional prospects were at their brightest, and all her friends had deplored her decision to give up her work.

Her motives for taking this step, as with all human motives, were mixed. She was passionately in love with Denys. She wanted to be to him all that a wife

should be, to help him in his career, to devote herself to his interests. Incidentally, she hoped for great social glory as the wife of an artist of established repute.

Unfortunately, Denys had no social ambitions Fundamentally Joyce was a snob and a "climber": Denys was an artist first, last and all the time. Her continued harping on "success," by which she meant money and *réclame*, began by distressing and ended by infuriating him. He was not by any means a rich man, but he had small private means which, in addition to what he made by the sale of his work, enabled them to live in reasonable comfort.

He saw no excuse therefore for Joyce's constant nagging at him to paint the kind of pictures that the "public liked." As he discovered only too quickly after the glamorous days of their honeymoon, Joyce knew nothing about painting and did not even possess normal good taste. It enraged him, therefore, that she would not allow him to mind his own business and that she had the effrontery to criticise what she was incapable of understanding.

On Joyce's side, as the years went by and she saw less and less likelihood of her social dreams being realised, her irritation against her husband increased. She kept telling herself that if she had not made the fatal mistake of marrying, she might have achieved dramatic fame. Her passion for the theatre was the

only genuine one she had, outside herself. The stage was in her blood.

As time went on, the frequency of her visits to the play increased. No show was too bad for her to sit out ; for her interest was primarily professional, and the play mattered less to her than the technique of the players. As Denys did not care to accompany her unless there was something which he considered specially worth seeing, she either went alone or in company with some woman-friend who was glad enough to share the complimentary tickets which, owing to her old professional status, were always at her disposal.

Just now, the theatre offered an outlet for her exasperation. Without a word to Denys, and indifferent whether he dined alone or did without a dinner at all, she went off by herself, and in a Piccadilly teashop indulged in one of those substitutes for a meal so dear to the feminine heart

It was the deadest of dead seasons, theatrically speaking. Many theatres were already closed ; others were on the point of doing so. She would be able to get a seat almost anywhere for the asking. Indifferent as to where she went she chose the nearest and was immediately accommodated with a seat in the stalls. The curtain had already risen. The lights were down. She made her way to her place and, unobservant of her neighbours, gave her attention to the performance.

When the first act ended and the auditorium lights went up again, her right hand neighbour rather startled her by leaning forward and saying :

"Surely it's Joyce Maudslay ? "

She swung round to find herself looking into a smiling face. For a moment or two she failed to identify it. Then suddenly came recollection.

"Charlie Milward ! What ages ! "

"So you do remember me ? I feel flattered."

"What about me ? " She gave him a coquettish glance.

"Couldn't possibly have forgotten you, Joyce. I was talking about you to a man only the other day, wondering what had become of you."

Discretion--the professional etiquette that prohibits actor folk from indulging in inquisitiveness about each other's private affairs--stopped Milward from saying more. He was keen enough to know all he could about her ; to have confirmation of his belief that he had run across her husband in Euzentern ; and to discover whether she was wise to that little episode. But it was too early yet to let her know what was in his mind. Plenty of time for that, he thought. He wanted to ingratiate himself with her first. She hadn't lost any of her attractiveness. Her well-developed charms were very much to his liking.

"Well," he resumed, "like me, you're having a busman's holiday, I suppose. I'm resting. Poor first act, that ; and no God-gifted interpretation of it,

either. Beats me how some of these mummers get London engagements."

Joyce cordially agreed with that dictum. It was in her nature to have a fair share of professional jealousy. She had never secured a really good part in a West End theatre, much as she believed in her ability to do justice to one.

"I'm not out of a 'shop,' you know," Milward continued. "Going on tour next month with 'The Girl Next Door,' one of Horace Franklin's companies."

The rise of the curtain kept them silent for half an hour. The play, however, was not arresting enough to banish Joyce's private thoughts. It merely increased her yearning for the stage. She had met very few actors for a long time, and it struck her that this encounter with Milward might assist her to get an engagement. He knew everybody in the theatrical world.

Milward, on his part, was meditating on Joyce. Her matured charms were growing on him. During the next interval he suggested taking her to supper after the show.

"That is, if you're not bound to get home right away," he said, as a feeler.

"Oh, that's all right. I've got a latchkey. Besides," she added cynically, "my husband won't worry."

Milward took her to Rule's, the little restaurant in Maiden Lane to which generations of actors and

actresses have been partial. Over their grilled kidneys Joyce said:

"I'm thinking of returning to the stage, Charlie."

"Good business, my dear. Got any particular engagement in view?"

"No, I wish I had. I'm rather out of it, you know."

"Would you go on tour?"

"I might. It would depend on the tour, though."

"If you like, I'll say a word for you to Franklin. He has two other shows going out this autumn, besides the one I'm starring in. Pity you're not in that, Joyce." He gave her a sidelong glance. "We could have had a ripping time together."

Joyce's eyelids fluttered and she smiled. Milward took this for encouragement.

"Not that we couldn't have that, anyway," he added amorously. "I've always been keen about you, dear. I thought at one time we were going to click. It was during that giddy week in Plymouth, when I was at the 'Royal' and you were playing at the 'Grand.' Do you remember?"

Joyce remembered the occasion well. They plunged into somewhat intimate reminiscences. In her present mood these old retrospects of stage doings and dressing-room amours were precisely to her liking. They took her back to her days of freedom. She had never felt at home in her husband's world. Milward's was the one to which, by inclination, instinct and early training, she belonged.

He talked her own language. She let him fill her glass for the third time with sweet, sparkling Muscatel.

"What a stroke of luck, meeting you this evening, darling," he said. "If I'd known your married name and how to get at you I'd have rung you up long ago. Where are you living?'

"A disgusting way out. Hampstead. My husband is Denys Stoughton—the artist."

Milward missed nothing of the distaste in her voice. So that was the way of it! A couple at variance! Surely, if he inflamed the breach and stimulated her jealousy by a judicious hint of her husband's doings in Euzentern, it would be to his advantage.

"Well, I'm blest!" he exclaimed with just the right dramatic emphasis.

"Why—what?" uttered Joyce.

"Well—you see. I ran across your husband a little while back—in Belgium." Milward's stammer sounded quite unforced. "At least, I suppose it was he. Is he a slight, dark man—about six foot?"

Joyce nodded. Her lips were compressed. Milward waited for another cue.

"What part of Belgium?" she asked.

"Place called Euzentern."

"With a woman—what?"

"Oh, well, if you know——"

"Of course I know!" she broke in. "And what's more I've seen the creature. They travelled back

together. He stuffed her into a taxi at Victoria almost under my very nose!"

Milward affected embarrassment.

"I say, Joyce, I—I'm awfully sorry. If I'd known I wouldn't have said a word. Last thing I'd do is to sow dissension between a man and his wife. I——"

Again she interrupted him, as he meant her to. His dose of poison would be far more potent if instilled by degrees.

"Look here, Charlie. As I said, I know there was a woman and I know the place. What I'm not sure of is what happened in it. I can see that you do. If you're a pal you'll tell me. I want the truth, right out."

"Of course, if you insist—and it's understood my name isn't mentioned. All right, then, I'll tell you what I know. It's this. They were staying at the same hotel as I was. They had communicating bedrooms, and as far as I could gather they passed as man and wife. I can't be certain, though, and wouldn't take my oath on it. I may, of course, be doing your husband an injustice. It might have been quite innocent for all I know to the contrary."

Discomfort at having these truths dragged out of him was exhibited in his face like that of a close-up on a camera screen.

"Innocent!" she scoffed. "You know perfectly well that you don't believe that, Charlie. For a long time I've known that he's running an intrigue with

that girl, though of course he strenuously denies it. It's rather humiliating, considering all I gave up to marry him. My career . . ."

Tears of self-pity welled into her eyes; her bosom heaved. Milward did what any other gay deceiver would have done. He patted her hand consolingly and filled up her glass again.

"Marriage *is* a rotten arrangement," he debated. "Especially for a pretty woman who's been on the stage—and made her mark there."

Joyce relished those last words. She dried her eyes.

"You know you're being wasted away from it," he continued. "I'll see Horace Franklin first thing to-morrow and try to fix you with him. Cheer up, old girl. There's a good time coming. Finish your wine. It's closing time."

Although inwardly grudging the expense he drove her home, compensating himself with much fondling and kisses.

"Like old times, eh, darling?" he gloated.

Quite compliant, she nodded.

"When shall I see you again?"

"Quite soon," she replied. "Here's my address." She gave him her visiting card. "Better let me have yours."

Taking it, she slipped it into her bag. The taxi came to a stop. She gave him a parting kiss, put her finger to her lips in sign of caution and tip-toed away to her door.

When the cab turned Milward lay back in his corner and lit a cigarette. The match illumined a smirk of complacency on his face. It also revealed the figures on the "clock."

"What, six bob already!" he ejaculated in dismay.

CHAPTER V

Evelyn's first day at St. Bridget's convinced her that Denys' description did it less than justice. She thought it a heavenly spot. The sea air, charged with revivifying ozone straight from the Atlantic, was like wine. The wild grandeur of the coast stimulated in her a new sense of vision. No picture she had ever seen compared with it. The gorgeous sapphire and emerald of the sea ; the many coves set in their golden sands, studded everywhere with rainbow-tinted rocks, and the ever-changing play of sunlight on both provided her with a panorama that she could only liken to the radiant spectacle seen in a kaleidoscope.

And the life she began to lead in this setting was in keeping with it. It was satisfyingly primitive. The day's work earned its night's repose. Each sparkling morning she turned out of her bed eager for the daily round : a scamper with Venables and Carter down to the beach ; a refreshing dip in the crisp sea water ; an amazingly ample breakfast (and an appetite to match it) ; a forenoon of joyous talk ; a walk about the quaint village ; a little preparation in the kitchen for the

early dinner ; an afternoon of lolling about while the men sketched, or a fishing expedition, and the evening symposium in Hugh's studio, where, to his piano accompaniment, she was made acquainted with such haunting sea-chanties as "Spanish Ladies," "Blow the Man Down," "Rolling down to Rio," as well as "Come all ye," with its rollicking chorus :

> "She'd a dark and roving eye,
> And her hair hung down in ring-a-lets."

It was a joyous life, healthy and unfettered. The only other thing that Evelyn ever wished for was the addition of Denys to the party. She longed for his arrival

CHAPTER VI

"EVE, have you ever been in love?"

She was perched on a pinnacle of iridescent rock in the full sunlight sitting to Stephen Hollins for a study for a *plein-air* picture. "Stanton" had been dropped in favour of the more intimate name.

"Heaps of times. I'm in love now."

Her voice was dreamy; her pose somnolent. In her verd antique bathing costume, bestrewn with sea-weed, still wet and clinging, she looked like a Naiad that had come ashore to drowse and meditate.

"Oh, you are, are you?" Stephen's tone was contentious. "Who with?"

"Not a person." She seemed to wake up suddenly; but she did not disturb her pose. "With St. Bridget's and everything round about."

"Oh, that! . . . Head a little more to the right. . . . You can't be in love with a *place*. That's an exaggeration. You can *like* it, but—— Dash it, you're not paying the slightest attention to what I'm saying!"

"Don't get into a paddy, Stephen. I was only thinking of the steak and kidney pudding I left on the

fire. Three hours, Mrs. Beeton says it takes. . . It ought to be scrumptious with the mussels in it "

Stephen wiped his brush viciously on his trousers—the usual place when he hadn't a paint-rag handy.

" I don't believe you've got a heart," he grumbled. " You're the icy English virgin of the Victorian ideal. Untouched and untouchable ! At least by me," he added ruefully. " Why don't you come to life, Eve ? "

" It isn't the season for apples. Give a poor girl time. Even if it were," she mocked, " remember your Browning : 'Where the apple reddens never pry lest we lose our Edens.' Don't let us lose our nice Edens, Stephen dear. I'm absolutely wallowing in mine ! "

He gave a grunt and went on painting feverishly. Presently he said :

" You're playing with me, Eve Is it fair ? You know well enough what my feelings are. At least you ought to."

" I'm not playing. And I'm being quite fair, only you won't see it."

He stopped and looked up at her interrogatively.

" I mean I'm doing my level best to preserve a friendship that I value. Can't you be satisfied with that, Stephen ? "

" Oh, Lord ! You'll be saying next that you'll be a sister to me ! "

" So I will—darling."

It was not the first time that she had found it necessary to chaff him out of a love-sick mood, and also to

put a curb on Wingfield's tenderness towards her. The knowledge that they had both "fallen" for her, though flattering to her self-esteem, troubled her more than a little. She was quite aware that the smallest word of encouragement to either would result in a declaration of love and a proposal of marriage.

She was extremely fond of them. But she had no particular preference for either, and strangely enough she had completely forgotten her assertion, made first to Denys and afterwards to Iris, that she would be contented to throw in her lot with any decent man who might ask her to marry him

"Stephen, I'm getting roasted in the sun!" she cried. "And this rock's like the top plate of an oven! And oh, my gracious, there's the pudding! I *must* scoot."

But she forgot all about the pudding when she reached the Hotel Vancarter, as it had got to be called. For there awaiting her was a letter from Denys. He would arrive in a day or two.

Neither cabbages nor kings, puddings or proposals were of any further interest to Evelyn.

CHAPTER VII

THERE was the customary reunion in Hugh Wingfield's studio that evening. The first to depart, a little earlier than usual, were Evelyn and her two " babes "—she on the plea of sleepiness, they because of an unwonted moodiness on the part of the other two men. Carter went, advising Hugh to stir his liver up with a pill. Venables thought that Stephen must have overdrawn his account at the bank. Themselves untroubled by anything in the nature of a heart complex, and with no more sentiment towards Evelyn than they would have evinced for a sister, they were an unobservant couple.

The remaining pair pulled at their pipes in silence for five minutes. Then without any animation Hugh mumbled:

" Denys coming day after to-morrow."

" M'm," went Stephen like a bass viol.

" Please Eve."

" Dessay."

A pause.

" And that girl—Iris Brown—next week."

"Shouldn't wonder," observed Stephen apathetically.

"What's the matter with her?" demanded Hugh with sudden resentment.

"Her? Who? Oh, nothing."

A longer pause this time. Stephen yawned.

"You going off to bed?" asked Hugh with a return of animation.

"Yes—no—look here!" Stephen pulled himself out of the big basket chair he had been doubled up in, took three irresolute steps across the room and faced about. "Better have it out. Eve, I mean. Can't go on like this."

"Don't quite see any necessity for——"

"Well, I do. Of course I know you're keen about her as well as me. What are we going to do about it?"

"It's for her to choose, isn't it?" debated Hugh.

"Quite. Question is: which of us is to ask her first?"

"Well, if you put it that way, I think I ought to have preference. I knew her first. If it weren't for me you'd never have met her."

This argument seemed to take Stephen unawares.

"That's true, but——"

He began to hesitate, rather over a choice of words than from reluctance to express what was in his mind. That was clear enough. He was in love with Evelyn—confoundedly in love—and he didn't see why he should concede preference to Hugh just because he had been first in the field. He thought it a rotten argument.

He was about to retort that knowing her first had no bearing on the point at issue, and that he had fallen in love with her on sight. But he quickly realised that Hugh might have done the same—possibly before *he* had. A more reasonable frame of mind resulted from the doubt. Dash it, he couldn't quarrel with old Hugh. His best friend.

His long silence and troubled face had the effect of restoring Hugh's equanimity. He, too, couldn't wrangle with Stephen; a sort of younger brother. A smile broke out on his face. Stephen answered it with a sheepish grin.

"Well, what do we do?" enquired Hugh. "Do I kill you, Steve, or do you kill me?"

"Don't talk rot, old chap. This is dashed serious. I'm hanged if I know how we're going to settle it."

"How about one of us giving her up?"

"Yes, but which one? And what's the use of talking about giving her up. Neither of us has got her yet."

"That's true," admitted Hugh. "Suppose we agree to an armistice. Agree not to propose to her down here. Wait till we get back to town. That suit you?"

"Quite." Stephen breathed relief. "I say, Hugh, do you know how you stand with her? Think she'll have you?"

An ominous expression pervaded Hugh's face.

"That's what I've been wondering. How about yourself?"

"God knows!"

They both fell into deep thought. Suddenly Stephen brightened up.

"I say," he exclaimed. "Let's put it to Denys. Ask him to arbitrate between us. After all, it's through him we got to know Eve. How's that?"

Hugh pondered the suggestion.

"It's fair enough. Perhaps it's the best way out."

"He could put it to her and let her decide for herself? Think he'd do it?"

"Yes, I do. He's married and won't be prejudiced in favour of either of us. He'll think only of Eve."

"Then we'll ask him when he comes—what?"

"No," replied Hugh judicially. "Let him form his impressions for himself. If he begins sounding her on the state of her feelings at once it'll make the whole lot of us uncomfortable. We don't want the atmosphere of St. Bridget's to become charged with electricity. Eve would get alarmed and unhappy. It'll be different when we're back in London."

Stephen concurred with a nod. He was trying to visualise Evelyn's verdict.

"Sort of judgment of Paris," he moralised reflectively.

CHAPTER VIII

THE telephone bell brought Joyce into the hall. A discreet voice asked for Mrs. Stoughton. Yes, she was speaking. The voice then divulged itself as that of Charles Milward. He was at Horace Franklin's office in Leicester Square. Could she come along there quickly? The "second woman's" part in "The Girl Next Door" had unexpectedly fallen vacant. If she would take it . . .

Within five minutes Joyce was on her way to the Tube, and little over an hour later home again with a contract in her handbag. She was in raptures. In anticipation she was already delivered from her Hampstead bondage, free from Denys, back again in an environment that ignored the boring restrictions and decorums of domesticity.

She waited until lunch-time to disclose her news. Suppressing her excitement, she said:

"I suppose you wouldn't raise any objection if I went back to the stage, Denys."

"No," he replied, assuming that she referred to some future contingency. "No, surely not," he repeated

as it dawned on him that if she were occupied at a theatre his dull and frequently antagonistic evenings at home with her would be suspended. Taking it for granted that she meant the London stage he did not visualise more emancipation than that.

"I've been offered quite a good part in a piece that's going on tour," she went on. "I thought, as you were going to Cornwall, I might as well accept it. I'm not particularly keen on being left alone here."

On tour! Denys felt that this was almost too good to be true. He had the greatest difficulty in stifling his delight.

"Quite so. Yes, I understand that. Then it means that you start quite soon?"

"Yes, in a week. I begin rehearsing this evening. Fortunately I'm a quick study, or at least I used to be. Sure you won't mind having dinner by yourself and managing without me until you go?"

"Oh, that'll be all right," he said airily. "Cook and Mary will look after me. What about money? You'll want some. I'll draw you a cheque."

"You needn't bother. I've got enough, and my salary is ten pounds a week."

"Good." He had considerable difficulty in forcing up his interest. "Well, I congratulate you, Joyce. I hope you'll have a pleasant time. I'm sure you'll be a great success."

"Thanks."

"Who's in the company? Anyone I know?"

" I don't think so."

" How long does the tour last ? "

" Until the end of November."

Denys fervently hoped he had succeeded in concealing his satisfaction and relief at the prospect of being spared her presence for three whole months. Joyce rejoiced in the knowledge that he couldn't possibly know that Charlie Milward was in the company she was about to join. Their mutual secret content livened them up for the rest of the day.

At tea-time the postman's rat-tat took Denys into the hall. He came back with two letters for Joyce and one for himself—the latter in a typewritten envelope. Opening it he read:

14, *Lemon Street,*
Covent Garden, W.C. 2.

Dear Sir,

With reference to the very serious matter which I discussed with you last week, I am surprised that you have not hitherto seen the advisability of communicating with me. You can hardly suppose that the affair will be allowed to rest where it is. I have shown you every possible consideration, and unless pushed to extremes I still have no desire to take such action as would involve you in the public exposure which your conduct deserves. I must warn you, however, that my patience is exhausted. Unless you immediately make amends for the wrong you have done an innocent and unprotected girl I shall be forced to adopt a course which must have decidedly

unpleasant consequences to yourself. I will give you until Thursday in which to settle the matter on the lines already indicated. If I do not hear from you by then I shall act without further notice.

Yours faithfully,
R. Cradeley.

Denys studied this document with curling lips, oblivious of his wife's inquisitive regard. When he had read it through a second time he slowly tore it across and across and threw the fragments into the waste-paper basket. Then he filled his pipe in a preoccupied manner, remarked that he would "get along back to the studio," and took his departure.

Joyce continued to sit motionless with her two negligible letters before her. The servants were engaged at their own tea. Denys would remain in the studio until dinner-time. So, secure from interruption, she drew towards her the waste-paper basket into which Denys had thrown the torn-up letter which had caused him so much thought. Precisely what she expected to discover in it she did not know; but that did not prevent her from exercising her curiosity.

The work of piecing it together was not easy. In comparison, the fitting of the tiny pieces of paper into their right places was a process more bewildering than any which a jigsaw puzzle had ever given her. At last, however, her labours were completed and her patience rewarded.

"So *that's* the man who called," she said to herself. "Robert Cradeley, the theatrical agent!"

She made a note of the address, replaced the torn fragments in the waste-paper basket, poured herself out a second cup of tea, lit a cigarette and sat down to think.

What she had discovered gave her ample food for cogitation. It was obvious that what Cradeley was out for was money, and equally obvious that Denys had no intention of giving him any. He would not have treated the letter so disdainfully if he had. What did it all mean? If Cradeley was to be taken seriously he had some hold over Denys. That was what she herself wanted to obtain.

Could she get it through Cradeley? She did not know him; had only heard of him through the columns of the *Stage*, and ignored his name when she had come across it in the Post Office Directory. She would have to think out some plan of action. Meanwhile, she went upstairs to look out an extra smart dress to wear at her first rehearsal.

Joyce was fully alive to the value of appearances.

CHAPTER IX

When two unscrupulous individuals have to do with one another the one with the quicker wits and most courage is bound to score. So it was with Joyce and Cradeley. A little reflection had convinced her that the best line to take with him was the dominant one. The initial advantage was already hers. She knew what he was up to; he would be unable to guess what her game was. There might be conflict, but she infinitely preferred conflict to conference.

So, next morning, with her plan of operations cut and dried, she made for number fourteen Lemon Street before going to rehearsal. The red-haired youth in the outer office hadn't a chance with her. Before he realised it she had crossed to the door of Cradeley's private room and gone into it.

Her entrance astonished Cradeley. He was still more astonished when she twisted a chair round, sat down, and curtly said:

"I'm Mrs. Denys Stoughton."

Cradeley, open-mouthed, made a noise like "Woof!"

"Now, Mr. Robert Cradeley, what's the particular

brand of dirty game you're trying to play with my husband ? "

" Madam," he stuttered. " I'm—er—at a loss to understand——"

" You can cut all that out. I've only got half an hour to spare. To save time I'll answer my question for you. It's blackmail—rank unmitigated blackmail. Well ? "

It wasn't at all well with Cradeley. He was positively unable to get a word out. He was in a blue funk. In an obscure way he had a conviction that the tables were being turned on him. He swallowed largely.

Joyce went on : " In case you don't happen to know it, I'm on the stage and I'm quite ready for any publicity likely to bring my name before the public. I can ensure that by sending for a policeman and giving you in charge. It would mean five years' penal servitude at the very least for you and an excellent advertisement for me."

The threat gave Cradeley the use of his tongue.

" But—but," he dithered, "it's *true*. I mean, your husband is—has done—behaved shamefully to my niece—in fact ruined her. He——"

Joyce cut him short.

" Oh, your niece is she ? I guessed she must be some underbred little horror on the make." She couldn't resist that touch of feminine spleen. " But you needn't think that because she's your niece

it will save you. You can't make use of a niece to levy blackmail. *Your* proper course would have been to take criminal proceedings against my husband. You didn't and so you've over-reached yourself."

Cradeley knew it. A sledge-hammer couldn't have brought the fact home to him any more forcibly than her words did. The whole dreadful weakness of his position—the menace of it—rushed down on him like an avalanche.

As he saw it, here was a woman, like a tiger with her cub, ready to fight to the bitter end in defence of what she held most dear. He couldn't understand her motive—the motive of a wife eager to protect a peccant husband. But if he didn't comprehend women he knew all about actresses: that they would go to any lengths to contrive an advertisement for themselves. The plainness of this one's threat in that respect was enough for him. It brought the danger of his position right home to him.

Desperately he mumbled: "I didn't take proceedings because my niece begged me not to."

"That makes it worse. Shows you were trying to get money for yourself."

"You can't prove that."

"I can! I heard everything you said that night in my husband's studio. I was listening outside. And what about the letter he got from you yesterday?"

Cradeley couldn't believe his ears. What sort of

husband was this who didn't mind exhibiting to his wife a letter revealing his unfaithfulness? They must be in collusion! Or was she incredulous about the Euzentern incident.

"Then you don't believe Mr. Stoughton committed himself with my niece?" he quavered.

"Oh yes, I do. That's what I've come about. I'm going to divorce him; and you've got to help me."

"Me?"

He stared at her. She was incomprehensible. First she threatened him, then demanded his co-operation in a scheme of her own. Proposed to use him as a cat's-paw!

"I'll have nothing to do with it," he squeaked.

"You will. You're in a tight place. You can't help yourself."

"But—but I haven't got any direct evidence in support of—of——"

"I know that," Joyce cut in. "How you do give yourself away! Start blackmailing on a threat without anything to support it, except what you're *told*!"

To himself, Cradeley said: "Now how the devil did she know that?"

"What I require of you is direct and conclusive evidence of my husband's carryings on with your niece in Euzentern. You had better go over there at once and get it."

"What? Leave my business? I won't! Besides, I don't understand the bally language!"

Joyce realised that, driven into a corner, he was showing fight. She had gone far enough.

"There's only one alternative," she said sternly. "Set a watch on him and get the evidence here. Keep him and your niece under observation. They're bound to be meeting somewhere or other. You'll have to employ a private detective."

"But that would cost money—a lot of money," he bleated.

"That's your affair." Joyce glanced at her wrist-watch and made as though to rise from her chair. "I'm going to get a divorce. My husband's well off. I shall ask for a thousand pounds damages. It all depends on you. If through you I get that sum, I'll give you a share. Now then!"

"How much?" hurriedly demanded Cradeley. It was giving up the substance for the shadow, but he saw there was nothing else for it. He was in a cleft stick.

"Half," Joyce answered just as promptly, intending to sue for two thousand.

Five hundred, the precise sum he had been trying to get out of Stoughton! Cradeley perked up. His antagonism to the virago facing him began to subside. He hadn't a doubt that she had good grounds for a divorce. He had never believed in Evelyn's innocence, nor in Stoughton's.

"Will you put that in writing?" he enquired cautiously.

"Depends how it's worded," replied Joyce with equivalent prudence.

Cradeley drew a blank sheet of paper towards him and indited a non-committal letter. It briefly set forth that in the event of Mrs. Stoughton bringing an action for divorce against her husband and securing a thousand pounds as damages she pledged herself to pay half of that sum to Mr. Robert Cradeley as reparation for the injury done to his niece, Evelyn Stanton. He headed and dated it from Corner Cottage.

Joyce read it, accepted the pen held out to her and signed it. She was quite satisfied. She had got all she wanted. Self-interest would keep Cradeley up to the mark. He would do his best for himself as well as her. She, also, anticipated a favourable verdict in a divorce suit against Denys.

"I'm starting on tour on Sunday," she said in a changed tone. "Here's my tour list. My stage name is Joyce Maudslay. I'll look to you to keep me informed of how things are going. My husband is going to St. Bridget's in Cornwall in a day or two. But you're not likely to get any evidence down there. Wait till he's back in London and then have a close watch kept on him and your niece. By the way," she added, "he has no idea that I intend to take action, so he won't be on his guard. Good-morning, Mr. Cradeley."

"Whew!" went Mr. Cradeley when the door closed on her.

CHAPTER X

It was a blithe Denys that arrived at Lyddstone Junction, the train's stopping-place for St. Bridget's. He had left Joyce in unaccustomed good spirits, full of her coming tour. And here was Evelyn on the platform eagerly scanning the carriage windows for him.

"Oh, Denys," she cried as they met. "I've been in a regular stew in case you didn't turn up!"

He was holding her hand, devouring her sun-browned face with uncontrolled love ardour. Never had he seen her in such radiant health and beauty.

"Why, what's the matter, dear? Anything happened?"

"No, but . . ." Discontinuing, she went on abruptly: "Come along. I've got the local tin-lizzy waiting for you outside. You're to stay at the inn with Stephen. We must be quick or we'll be late for supper. We're all having it at Hugh's to-night."

She was excited. He thought it was on his account. The assumption gratified but disturbed him. He knew he ought not to have allowed his face to

express so plainly his joy at being with her once more.

In the car, which she drove with a dexterity that surprised him, she evaded his many questions concerning herself. That she was "all right" and was "having a jolly time" was all he could get out of her. What she wanted was news of himself. Once again he had nothing to say on that score. He couldn't bring himself to talk of Joyce. He confined himself to telling her of the decorative work he had been engaged on for a certain well-known connoisseur. The information did not seem to interest her much.

At the inn Stephen welcomed him vociferously. He had a cocktail ready. Evelyn handed over the car to a man in the yard and ran off to change her tweed frock for a more suitable evening costume.

"Come and have a look at my latest work of art," said Stephen. "Eve on the rocks! We're all painting her—but I rather fancy my effort."

He took Denys into his sitting-room and lifted the protecting cloth from a canvas. It showed a three-quarter life-size portrait of Evelyn, an enlarged replica of the study he had made of her on the beach. Denys was struck by the brilliance of it.

"Not quite finished yet, but another sitting or two will do it."

"Jolly good. Everything you want," was Denys' verdict. "Colour, atmosphere, likeness. But why the sad expression, Stephen?"

"Oh, she's like that sometimes," was the off-handed reply. "I'll take you up to your room. You'll be glad of a wash and brush up."

Denys changed into flannels, and together they walked down to Hugh's bungalow.

Although he was outwardly cheerful and talkative throughout supper, underneath his conversational mask Denys kept an observant eye on Hugh and Stephen's attitude towards Evelyn. With his perceptions quickened by love he was soon in no doubt as to their feelings for her. All he could do was to grin and bear it. There was nothing soothing in the thought that they, being unmarried men, were free to give rein to those feelings and that he, alas, was not.

And what did his own discretion avail him? Nothing at all. The obvious fact was borne in upon him that neither Hugh nor Stephen looked on him as a possible competitor for her favour. They naturally regarded him as a happily married man and took it for granted that such sentiments as he held for her were in accordance with his position and therefore negligible.

Poor Denys! The blitheness he had brought with him to Lyddstone Junction had not lasted long!

Part Three

CHAPTER XI

DURING the following fortnight Evelyn found her work cut out to prevent the situation from becoming unmanageable. If she spent too much time with Stephen, Hugh began to look suicidal. If she took a walk with Hugh, Stephen became distraught. Not even with Denys was she wholly at ease. He seemed to have something on his mind.

It was a great relief to her when Iris arrived. She provided a new distraction to her two avowed suitors and even to her secret one. For Iris in the country was a dazzling importation that willy-nilly drew all eyes. She didn't ask for attention—she inspired it very much as *Vanessa Cardui*, or any other highly "painted lady," out of her usual surroundings would have done.

Iris soon showed that she was no mere town ornament. She out-classed the men at tennis, out-swam them, could pull a boat with the best, and excelled as a fisherman. Evelyn marvelled at her accomplishments and thanked her stars for the tension she relieved.

A day or two later Hugh and Stephen asked Iris to

pose for the figure and she agreed without a moment's hesitation. All she stipulated for was that they should both paint her at the same time. After the first sitting she admitted to Evelyn that the experience disappointed her.

"My dear," she declared, "I simply ached all over at the end of ten minutes. And all the time they looked at me with the detachment they might have given to a lump of chalk! It made me feel like one—a particularly small lump, too. Are they like that with you?"

Evelyn shook her head. "I've only posed for the altogether to women," she replied. "Besides, they haven't asked me."

"Would you, if they did?"

"I don't think a girl ought to to men she's very intimate with."

"What you mean, my dear, is that this lot are all gone on you and you know it," smiled Iris. "I think you're wise. Even I wouldn't have cared to put temptation in the way of one of them alone. What a lucky girl you are to have three such ardent admirers."

"Three?" exclaimed Evelyn.

"Well, of course. Isn't there Denys?"

Evelyn felt her face burning. "What nonsense! He's married," she protested.

Iris laughed. "Well, he can't help that Perhaps he regrets it. Or perhaps . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Iris. You're—you're incorrigible."

Presently Evelyn said: "I shan't be sorry to get back to London."

"I don't want to think about London for another week. Life's too perfect here. Still, go back to my daily round I shall have to then. Sir Alfred's personal secretary is waiting for me to get her holiday. I shall have to take her place. Perhaps it'll lead to something. I've got rather a hunch that it will. That is, if I get the opportunity to put my business theories into practice. . . . What about a swim? I've got a duck of a *maillot* that the boys haven't seen yet. Gee, won't it tease them!" she gurgled as she ran upstairs to change into it.

PART IV

Part Four

CHAPTER I

It was the end of September. Denys was at home again, bodily refreshed by his Cornish holiday, striving hard to keep Evelyn out of his thoughts and to put her out of his heart. Although he did not succeed in either effort, the harassing state of his mind was somewhat modified by the unwonted peace and quietness that prevailed in his cottage now that Joyce was not there to irritate and upset him. Moreover, two main interests acted on him as a sedative.

On his return he had found a letter offering him an excellent commission. This was from a wealthy compatriot, who had previously bought two of his exhibited pictures and had several times expressed strong faith in his future as an artist. He now invited Denys to go down to his country house in Shropshire for a fortnight to paint his wife's portrait. With the invitation was a tempting fee, both of which Denys at once accepted.

Meanwhile, he was hard at work on a large canvas of his own. This was a subject picture for which he had made several studies whilst at St. Bridget's. It was more

ambitious than anything he had hitherto attempted—a scene depicting the jetty and the fishing fleet with a number of figures in the foreground, the most prominent being that of Evelyn.

Inspired mainly by her, he had achieved an admirable composition and charged it with abundant spirit. So far, the picture was only roughed in. Brush in hand, he was regarding it with considerable satisfaction when the telephone extension in his studio interrupted him. The call was from Stephen from his studio in Belsize Park.

"Can you come round here ?" he asked. "Hugh is with me. We want to see you on a very important matter."

Denys smiled. He didn't believe in anything important emanating from Stephen. But he left his work and went.

He found the two men in a peculiarly odd state of agitation. Hugh was marching up and down with a frown on his face. Stephen, although ensconced in a big chair, seemed to have a fit of the fidgets. They both glanced up when he came in, but neither gave him a word of greeting.

"Well, what's up ?" he demanded.

Stephen looked at Hugh; Hugh looked at Stephen.

"You tell him," they said in unison, and then dried up.

"That's right. Break it gently," said Denys

humorously. "Work gone wrong? Or is it something infectious?"

"It's about Eve," mumbled Hugh.

Denys' smile disappeared. "What's happened to her?"

"Nothing. It's us."

"Go on," said Denys. He guessed now what was coming.

"Fact of the matter is," Hugh began, in a state of visible nervousness, "Stephen and I are—well, helplessly in love with Eve. When we—er—found it out at St. Bridget's we—er—had a few words. With one another I mean, not her."

"What has all this got to do with me?" Denys fiercely demanded.

"You'll know in a moment," interposed Stephen. "Go on, Hugh."

"Well, the long and the short of it is, we came to a sort of agreement. Decided not to say anything to her until we got back to town. And here we are."

Hugh came to a stop, bodily and verbally, as though he had made everything clear.

Denys stared at him.

"What he means," put in Stephen helpfully, "is that we leave it to you, Denys."

"I refuse to have anything whatever to do with it."

"But, look here, old chap, you——"

"We're counting on you to——"

Again they spoke simultaneously. Denys silenced them with a gesture. He was provoked and heart-stricken.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he demanded furiously.

"It's simple enough," replied Hugh. "You've known Eve longer than we have. She's a sort of protégée of yours. At St. Bridget's we agreed to refer the matter to you—to decide between us. For Eve's sake we're quite prepared to abide by your opinion as to which of us is the more likely to make her happy. That's all we want."

Stephen, nodding concurrence, chipped in:

"In short, we submit ourselves to the judgment of Denys. It's as near as we can get to Paris—the man I mean." He grinned nervously. "After all, St. Denis is the patron saint of Paris—the town, you know."

"But, my good fools——" Denys broke off helplessly. He recalled the fact that his sainted namesake walked a couple of miles after his head was cut off. These two, though they did not guess it, were asking him to pluck his heart out and walk with it barefoot over the hot cinders of hell! "What good will *my* decision do? Surely the decision lies with Evelyn herself?"

"Quite," resumed Hugh rather huffily. "Of course we know we can't both marry her. All we're asking you to do is to sound her—to act as our ambassador and try to discover how—er—the land lies—which of us she prefers. After all, she must have guessed by

now that we both want her. She's had plenty of time to pass judgment on us."

To have such a ghastly task thrust on him weighed Denys down. He could refuse it, of course. He wanted to refuse it. But if he did, what would it avail him? They would take things into their own hands and separately propose to Evelyn.

In any case she was lost to him. Hadn't she said that she would marry any decent man likely to make her happy? And at that time she had not counted on being courted by anyone in so good a position as Hugh or Stephen. She would, for a certainty, accept one or the other. And what better fate could he wish for her? He caved in.

"Very well," he said in a resigned voice. "I'll do my best. I'll speak to her."

He picked up his hat and hurried away, followed by their protestations of gratitude. By the time he got home his brain was numbed by incessant recapitulation of his many sorrows. He could see no sense or purpose in his life, and had little energy left to continue an existence which, without Evelyn, would be empty and meaningless.

CHAPTER II

ANXIETY often drives people to meet their troubles half-way. It had that effect on Denys. The next night he was waiting for Evelyn in the hall at " Highfield." As she descended the staircase he noticed that her face wore a look of caution. It disappeared as soon as she caught sight of him.

" Oh, I'm so glad it's you ! " she exclaimed in a tone of relief.

" You were expecting somebody else ? "

" No." She lowered her voice. " But half an hour ago I saw my uncle in the street. He was hovering about as though watching the house. What can he be up to, do you think ? "

Denys shook his head. He felt no apprehensions of Cradeley. Quite another matter occupied his mind.

" Is there a quiet place where we can have a talk ? " he asked.

" Yes, there's a small room at the end of the hall. It's generally empty in the evening."

When they were inside it and the door shut, he said without preamble.

"I was with Hugh and Stephen last night. They gave me a message for you."

"How funny! I saw them both this afternoon. Why didn't they give it me then?"

"You didn't notice anything—strange about them?"

"Nothing out of the usual," she answered circumspectly.

"I suppose, my dear, you realise that they're in ove with you?"

Evelyn nodded. Her colour began to flow.

"Well, they've asked me to put in a word for them."

"How absurd!"

"My own opinion, precisely." Denys was doing his best to adopt a lawyer-like tone. "If there's any excuse for them it's due to the fact that I've known you longer than they have, and also to avoid a clash. I must do them the justice of admitting that they are considering you first and themselves afterwards. For some reason best known to themselves they consider I'm qualified to act as their representative—to discover if I can which of them you prefer. If I'm indiscreet in coming on such an errand please forgive me."

"Oh, bosh! You needn't apologise Denys. They know how good-natured you are, that's why. The idiots!"

"They're both serious enough."

"I know."

"Well, which is it to be—Hugh or Stephen? I suppose you do care for one of them."

A corner of Evelyn's lip began twitching.

"I care for them both. Quite fond of them in fact."

"Enough to marry one of them? In the present state of the law, you know, a woman can't have two husbands." He let out this piece of facetiousness with a ghastly smile. "You'll have to choose between them."

"But why need I choose either, Denys?"

The tone in which she asked the question left him with the impresson that she was disinclined to relinquish the prerogative of her sex—of leaving that option to the proposer.

"No, there's no *necessity*, of course. But considering the views you expressed about marriage—the security it would give you—don't you think you ought to make a choice? There are no two men I think more highly of than Hugh and Stephen. Don't forget they're both in a position to keep a wife in comfort."

After a quick glance up at him, the softness of which he entirely missed, she replied:

"I know I said a lot of silly things in Ostend. I've changed my mind about some of them."

"Have you? Why?"

"It's a woman's privilege, isn't it?"

"Well, to come back to Hugh and Stephen. What am I to say to them?"

"Say I'm very much obliged and flattered."

"Is that all?"

"I think so. I might, under certain conditions, marry a man from mercenary motives. But not Hugh or Stephen. I'm too fond of them."

"You mean," asked Denys with sudden elation, "that neither of them has a chance? That you don't *love* them?"

She shook her head.

"You're not angry, are you, Denys?" There was a hint of roguishness in her voice, and that he also missed.

"*I* angry with *you*?"

What more he might have said was cut short by the entrance of an old lady in search of her knitting. They returned again to the lounge-hall, where he sat for a while curiously distrait, but with a look of contentment on his face that intensified until it was time to leave her.

"The dear old silly!" she said to herself when he had gone; and her heart sang as she went up to bed.

CHAPTER III

Iris's accomplishments in private life were marked enough. In the city they were all crystallised in the one word Efficiency. She was the Spirit of Business personified. Anyone watching her would have realised as much. Sir Alfred Napp did so to some extent; but with the complacency of a self-made man he had a tendency to underrate the capacity of anybody whose position was inferior to his own.

But just now Iris was free from any observant eye. She was the sole occupant of the small but comfortable ante-room to the spacious office reserved to the head of the firm. Temporarily she had been "moved up one" during the absence of Sir Alfred's personal secretary, now on holiday.

Iris's room was a dainty place. Only through it was access to the Great Man's presence obtainable. Hence it was furnished somewhat luxuriously. Its Turkey carpet was soft and thick. It held a miniature replica of next door's mahogany roll-top desk; a couple of deep armchairs for the convenience of visitors; a telephone of its own. In addition, there was a cabinet

whose glass front was discreetly veiled on the inside by green silk, which contained a small tea-equipage and a special brand of tea for the regalement of Sir Alfred (and his personal secretary) whenever he felt inclined for an afternoon stimulant of that kind.

Iris was out-doing herself in industry. She sat at the roll-top desk, most of whose drawers were open. Methodically, but at amazing speed, she was going through the documents and papers they contained. She had been doing this ever since her return from St. Bridget's. In this she was perhaps exceeding her strict duties. But Iris was very thorough. It was not in her to lose the opportunity of making herself acquainted with confidential matters which the firm normally kept under lock and key. As deputy for the absent personal secretary, Iris was in possession of the keys.

Kalatung Minefields, Limited, a concern which operated several copper mines in North Ontario, was the particular subject engrossing her attention. The firm of Napp and Schwegelberg were considerable holders in it, and Sir Alfred was a director. Its shares were at a discount. Curious as to the reason of this, Iris, from among the documents in the drawers of the desk, had made the discovery that quite recently a new shaft had been sunk on the property and that the fact had not transpired. No mention of it had been made by any of the staff, nor had it been announced in any of the financial newspapers. And yet here was a mass of

information about it—letters from the manager of the minefield, reports from the assayer on the spot. These spoke of hopeful prospects, but with a note of caution. A cable in the firm's private code was promised directly any definite result was arrived at.

Iris looked at the clock on the mantelshelf. It was nearly ten. Sir Alfred was due at the quarter past. She put the papers back in the drawers of the little roll-top desk and locked them. Then she collected the morning's correspondence, glanced through it, sharpened a pencil, powdered her nose, and was ready for the day's work.

Half an hour later it was proceeding in normal fashion. By eleven, shorthand notebook perched on her right, she was typing away at her dictated letters. In the next room Sir Alfred was in conference with his partner. Now and again a caller was shown in, kept waiting, received in audience, and shown out again.

Things were slack. Sir Alfred departed with his partner for lunch a little before one o'clock, announcing that they would not be back until a quarter to three. Iris, once more her own mistress for a couple of hours, lit a cigarette and debated whether to sit at her ease and look through the *Financial Times* or go out and have her lunch first.

Her decision on this point was delayed by the entrance of an office boy with a cablegram. Iris opened it with customary indifference. Then she nearly

jumped. The cablegram was in code—a private code. And the postal office of despatch was Ontario !

" Now then, now then ! " she thought, battling with excitement. " You've got two hours. There may be nothing in this worth knowing. On the other hand there may. First, the code. Where's it kept ? If it's in the safe, I'm done. But is it ? If it's in a drawer of the governor's desk and the desk's shut, what then ? And which drawer ? Take a month of Sundays searching ! I ought to have prepared for this. Careless of me."

She was by the roll-top desk in Sir Alfred's room by this time. It was shut. Her heart sank. No, it wasn't shut ! The automatic closing apparatus hadn't quite functioned. In a moment she was on her knees opening drawers, searching among papers. At the back of her mind—her curiously photographic mind—was the recollection of having once seen something like a code-list on his desk : a few closely-typed foolscap sheets in violet ink. This memory narrowed down her search to three drawers of loose papers. With ears alert against interruption she settled down to a methodical sifting of these. The minutes flew ; æons seemed to pass and—she'd got it !

Where she was, on the floor, she made a transcript of the cablegram. It ran :

Assay new shaft shows four pennyweights gold in rich deposit copper.

She replaced the code, closed the drawers and pulled down the lid of the desk so that the lock clicked. And while she went through these actions she thought at speed. Four pennyweights of gold to the ton meant a return sufficient to pay all mining and smelting expenses of the copper. It also meant a coming appreciation in Kalatung shares. A far-away look was in her eyes; but a ferment was going on within her.

Suddenly alert again, she sped back into her own room, placed the cablegram under a paperweight, pulled on her hat and picked up her gloves and handbag. The clock told her she had an hour and a quarter in which to make use of her information. She went out, passing through an outer office full of clerks with deliberate slowness and left the premises.

But in the street she raced. A stockbroker's office in Austin Friars was her destination. In less than five minutes she was in parley with one of its principals.

"I want to buy some mining shares," she announced.

"For investment?"

"No, for the Account."

The broker looked her over He couldn't quite place her.

"The Account has only four more days to run," he said amiably but decisively, "I'm afraid that, as we haven't done business with you before, we shall have to ask for reasonable cover. Will that be convenient?"

"There isn't any need for cover. There will be a rise

in the shares this evening, or at latest by midday to-morrow."

He smiled at her indulgently. "Of course that's possible but . . ." His shoulders went up sceptically. "May I ask what particular shares you wish to acquire?"

"Certainly—after I have your firm promise to buy them for me," answered Iris.

He pursed his lips. "I'm afraid, Miss—er——"

"Brown." She produced an envelope addressed to herself, care of Messrs. Napp and Schwegelberg of Lothbury, E.C.2., and laid it on his desk. "I am Sir Alfred Napp's personal secretary," she went on, looking him steadily and very informatively in the eyes. "I have four years' experience of stock transactions. There is no risk whatever about the purchase I want to make." She turned her wrist and glanced at her watch. "But time is important. I can of course go elsewhere."

The broker—Holding was his name—leant forward and in a discreet voice said:

"I take it you want to give me to understand that you have special information?"

"Quite," said Iris.

Mr. Holding did some quick thinking. Inside information from a firm like Napp and Schwegelberg's was worth acquiring. That this young woman had got it surreptitiously was fairly certain. Her cautious manner was evidence of it. Future business with her might be extremely profitable. If he took a chance

now he would probably secure that future business. He smiled at her across the table.

"That certainly makes a difference, Miss Brown. No, I don't think you need go elsewhere. Give me the name of the shares and the quantity you want to buy and I'll toddle over to the 'House' and get 'em."

"Is that firm?"

"Firm and quite definite."

"Then it's Kalatungs. And I want five thousand—Ordinary. I'll wait, but be quick."

Directly he was gone Iris took a deep breath. Then she pulled out her pocket mirror and inspected herself in it.

"No, I don't look excited; and I certainly mustn't when I get to the office," she thought, and fell to employing her enforced wait with powder-puff and lipstick.

Mr. Holding was soon back.

"What price?" she enquired.

"Eleven and three," he told her.

"Thanks so much." She got up. "I don't expect I shall hold on after to-morrow. By the way, please enter the transaction in the name of Miss Evelyn Stanton, of 'Highfield,' Harrington Gardens."

"I quite understand," he replied, making a note of the name and address.

A sandwich and a glass of milk in an A.B.C. shop was all Iris allowed herself before returning to Lothbury. A quarter of an hour later Sir Alfred reappeared. She handed him the cablegram.

"This arrived just after you went to lunch, Sir Alfred," she said. "As Mr. Schwegelberg was out too, I couldn't——"

He gave it a single glance and bolted with it into his office. She heard him unlock his desk and pull out a drawer. A silence ensued.

"Decoding it," was her smiling thought.

Then she heard him unhook the receiver of his telephone and speak a few quick words.

"House-call for Schwegelberg, I bet," was her reflection.

The prediction was almost instantly fulfilled. Mr. Schwegelberg came in and entered the headpartner's room. Two minutes later he and Sir Alfred emerged and hurried away.

"Off to their broker to 'bull' Kalatungs," she nodded to herself. "Nice of them to want to send my five thousand up. 'Oh that will be glory for me, glory for me-e,'" she hummed on her way to Sir Alfred's room, where she helped herself to one of his Melachrino's.

After she had slowly, luxuriously and with the utmost enjoyment consumed her cigarette, she became once more the industrious and efficient secretary. But she worked with all her senses on the alert. At each fresh spasmodic click of the Exchange Telegraph machine in the adjoining room she flew to it to see whether it was recording anything about her newly-acquired shares. For an hour it was silent

concerning them. Then Sir Alfred returned and she had no further opportunity of consulting it. But at five o'clock on her way home she bought a *Standard* at the tube station and scanned the financial columns.

Kalatung Ordinary had closed at twenty-one shillings!

"Eve," she said at dinner, "the big push has begun."

"What on earth do you mean?" Evelyn demanded.

"Never you mind. But you're in it, my dear. Try and imagine this stewed mutton is something jolly good *à la Financière.*"

Part Four

CHAPTER IV

Any other girl but Iris would there and then have blurted out her day's doings. She dearly wanted Evelyn to share in her jubilation, but prudence restrained her. Her chickens were only partially hatched.

But two days later Kalatungs touched thirty-five shillings and she sold out, fully satisfied with her profit. That night at dinner Evelyn was mystified at seeing a bottle of champagne on the table.

"Some mistake, I suppose," she said.

"Don't think so." Iris twisted the bottle round and inspected the label. "Roederer 1914. That's what I ordered. Ought to be in excellent condition."

"*You* ordered it?"

"Yes, my dear. And if I get absolutely blotto on it—and you too—I jolly well don't care."

"Iris! What's the idea?"

And Iris, to the accompanying clatter of plates from a dozen tables, told her the story of

how she had put her theories regarding female capacity for "big business" into successful practice.

"And guess how much I've made out of it?" she asked triumphantly. "You can't? No wonder! The figure gave *me* a bit of a jolt at first. Just on six thousand pounds, my dear!"

Evelyn gave a gasp. "I can't realise it! Why it's a fortune!"

Iris nodded. "Or the nucleus of one. Enough to set up housekeeping on, anyhow. And no worries about the future."

"How perfectly splendid! Oh, my dear, I simply don't know how to tell you how glad I am! Tell me, what are you going to do?"

"Find a flat, for the first thing. Just big enough for the two of us. Think of the gorgeous fun it'll be furnishing it and settling ourselves in."

"But, Iris, I could never afford——"

"Rats! Think I'm going to live alone? Besides, you're making at least six pounds a week. You can't possibly eat two pounds' worth of food in a week, if that. It'll cost you about half of what you're paying here. So don't make any more silly difficulties. You know I haven't any other woman pal but you. I'm not going to take any refusal."

Evelyn's face betrayed her delight.

"All right," she said. "I'll come, and joyfully.

Where—what part you are thinking of living in?"

"I've got rather a hunch for Soho. The west end of it. There are a lot of fine old roomy houses at the back of Glasshouse Street that ought to make ripping flats. And we should be right in the middle of things, with no end of good little French and Italian restaurants handy. Drink up your wine, old thing. We'll go up to my room and talk it over."

Upstairs the fascinating subject kept Iris's tongue busy for another half-hour. Then she said:

"Oh, I haven't told you. As a precaution I bought and sold my shares in your name. That's what I meant when I said you were 'in it.' I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not."

"I don't think your name will come out. It'll only appear on what's called a 'ticket.' *You* won't see it. But if Sir Alfred does he may tumble to my hand in the transaction."

"But why should he? He doesn't know anything about me."

"Only what you told him on the telephone. He's got an infernally good memory. And the title I gave you is sure to be engraven on it."

"What would happen then?" Evelyn asked, a little apprehensively.

"He'd give me the sack, that's all."

"Oh, good gracious!"

Iris laughed. "Don't worry, my dear. I want him to!"

CHAPTER V

STOCK EXCHANGE Settling Day had come and gone. Accountants in city offices were all informed of the transference of stocks and shares in their various companies. So, too, were some of their directors. Included among these was Sir Alfred Napp. The rise in Kalatungs and the big profit resulting from it to his firm had stimulated his curiosity into scrutinising the list of dealings in the shares.

As an outcome of this interesting study he had discovered that a block of five thousand had passed in and out of the hands of Miss Evelyn Stanton, of 'Highfield,' Harrington Gardens. He had forgotten neither the name nor the address. He also remarked the date of purchase. It coincided with that of the receipt of his cablegram from Canada. For two days these details simmered in the mind of Sir Alfred. On the third day they boiled over.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said to Iris after the dictation of his letters, "you reside at a place known as 'Highfield' in Harrington Gardens. Is that so, Miss Brown?"

"That is my address, Sir Alfred," she replied, and to herself added: "Now for ructions!"

Sir Alfred picked up a paper-knife and inspected it narrowly.

"A Miss Evelyn Stanton of the same address appears to have purchased five thousand Kalatung Ordinary shares on the eleventh of this month and sold them again on the thirteenth. The lady in question is, I believe, a friend of yours."

"Yes, a valued friend."

"I imagined so," observed Sir Alfred, with flinty irony. "I also recall that you referred to her some weeks ago as *Lady* Evelyn."

"Nobody, I assure you, Sir Alfred, better deserves the attribute."

He swung round in his chair and glared at her.

"No facetiousness, please, Miss Brown. I suggest to you that this Miss Stanton and yourself, in regard to the transaction in these five thousand shares, are one and the same person."

"Absolutely," concurred Iris.

The frank admission took him by surprise. He had expected a denial, or at least prevarication.

"You don't deny it?"

"Certainly not."

"But—but, damn it, you"—in his exasperation he nearly said "ought to"—"you don't seem to realise the heinousness of your offence." He rapped on the desk with his paper-knife. "Miss Brown, you

purchased those shares as a result of information dishonestly obtained in this office. You made use of information contained in a private cablegram. I don't know how you did it, but that's not the point."

"What is the point, Sir Alfred?"

"Good God! Isn't it obvious? A gross betrayal of the trust imposed in you."

"Oh no, not *trust*," Iris replied sweetly. "If that's a reference to the cablegram, how could it be? It was in a code I had never seen before."

"Do you expect me to believe that? You must have got hold of a copy of it."

"I assure you I didn't. I only made use of the original."

Sir Alfred began spluttering. "And you have the effrontery——"

"Don't be ridiculous, Sir Alfred. Audacity, if you like, but not effrontery. There's nothing unlawful in audacity. Rather a superior quality, in fact, and in business perfectly legitimate. You employ it yourself nearly every day of your life."

"How dare you lecture me! You—you've acted disgracefully. Your engagement here will terminate at the end of the week. That's all I have to say to you, Miss Brown. Now you can go."

Iris didn't go. She leant an arm on the corner of the big roll-top desk and with the utmost equability replied:

"Just a minute first, Sir Alfred. No, no, I'm not

going to make any excuses or appeal to your clemency. But you've been doing most of the talking and I should like a turn. I'm merely going to say a word or two for the women in city offices in a similar position to mine. The attitude towards them of men like you is frankly indifferent, not to say hostile. You underrate their abilities. You can't conceive that some of them are as competent to grasp an opportunity and as capable of utilising it as you are yourself. *You* may employ your wits to get ahead of the other fellow. All's fair in business is your maxim. But in a woman it's reprehensible. As for myself——"

"Don't bandy words with me," he interrupted tartly. "I refuse to listen to you. Why, damn it, I could have you arrested!"

"Why don't you, then? Is it out of kind-heartedness or benevolent consideration for me? Not a bit of it. It's because you think, and think rightly, that I know too much. What, for instance, would your co-directors say to your getting advance information about Kalatungs and using it for your own private advantage? What would a jury say?"

Sir Alfred gasped. He also gave a perceptible shiver.

"You—you threaten me?" he stammered.

Iris lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug.

"I'm merely making it clear to you, Sir Alfred, that I'm a thoroughly capable business woman, and that I don't for a moment reproach myself for having had the

wit "—here she favoured him with a whimsical smile —" to seize —well, let's call it the psychological moment for getting in on the ground floor. Of course I'm not silly enough to take *all* the credit for that." Her smile widened. " My best business instincts are really due to the excellent example you've set me yourself, Sir Alfred."

The suavity of the last two sentences had a remarkable effect on him. His morose expression relaxed. His face cleared. It began to reflect her smile. She had tickled his sense of humour. He was quite aware that she was designedly flattering him ; but he liked it. He also recognised that in her counter-threat concerning his co-directors she had turned the tables on him. In business Sir Alfred always knew when to "cut a loss." This was more in the nature of a dialectical ring-fight in which he had lost ascendancy. To avoid a knock-out he threw in the towel.

" Upon my word, you've got a nerve ! " he said with a ghost of a chuckle which a sense of personal dignity made him hastily stifle. " Still, you know, Miss Brown, I can't possibly keep you on after what has happened."

" As you like. I suppose you prefer to employ fools ? How can you expect a brainy girl who's in a position of responsibility to be satisfied with a paltry five pounds a week ? Much better for yourself if you made it worth her while not to double-cross you."

" Humph ! You're frank enough."

Sir Alfred became lost in meditation. "If this minx leaves me," he reflected, "she'll go to some other financial house and make use of all the information she's picked up here. God knows what a girl like her hasn't learnt of my private affairs! That would be the deuce and all. I suppose I'd better keep her."

In a tone of relentment he said: "There's no doubt about your ability, Miss Brown. In consideration of it I'll keep you on. But mind, no more double-crossing. If I put you in a position of trust you must promise me you won't take advantage of it. Miss Campbell, I believe, is shortly going to be married. Her place as my personal secretary will have to be filled—permanently filled. How would that suit you?"

"Quite perfectly," she replied. "You won't regret giving me the post."

"H'm," went Sir Alfred. "I suppose I shall have to double your salary."

"Treble it, you mean," was Iris's quick correction.

She gave him a bright smile and retired to her own room.

If there was a suggestion of victory in her smile Sir Alfred had sufficient tact to ignore it.

CHAPTER VI

One Sunday evening about eight o'clock, a big limousine put Denys down at the Arts Club. He had been driven up to town from Shropshire by his American friend. The portrait he had gone down there to paint had taken him less than a fortnight, so here he was back again a week sooner than he had expected or Joyce was aware of. He had written to her at Nottingham, where she was playing, telling her of his intended three weeks' absence, but forgotten to warn her or his servants of his earlier return. Doubtful therefore of finding anything to eat at his own house, he had elected to dine at his club.

It was ten o'clock when he got home. He found it in darkness, all but a glimmer of light through the closed curtains of Joyce's bedroom.

"Mary up there," he thought, as he let himself in and switched on the light. "Wonder if my bed's made in the studio. Better let her know I'm here."

Leaving his luggage in the hall, he went to the foot of the staircase and called her. There was no response. After waiting a minute he proceeded towards

the kitchen. He found it in darkness. Evidently the cook was out. He retraced his steps and went upstairs, making for Joyce's room, switching on lights as he proceeded.

"Mary!" he called as he approached it, and again failed to get a reply. "Deaf," he laughed tolerantly as his hand went to the door-knob.

It turned, but the door held fast. He rapped on the panel.

"Mary, are you there? It's I, Mr. Stoughton."

The silence was maintained. He came to the conclusion that Mary, as well as the cook, had gone out, carelessly leaving the light on. Suddenly it struck him as odd that the door should be locked. Even if for some incomprehensible reason she had locked it, why had she taken the key away? Was it on the inside? If so, so must she be. Impatiently and with a touch of vague suspicion, he rattled the handle and in a louder voice called:

"Don't you hear? Open the door. Mr. Stoughton speaking."

His attentive ears caught a slight sound of commotion—a bustling sound, as of clothing being hastily donned. So Mary was there, after all! What was she up to? An unpleasant inference struck him. She'd got a man in there with her!

"Now what the devil had I better do?" he thought. "Go down so that she can quietly let him out, or——No, I'm damned if I'm going to condone that sort of

thing." He raised his voice. "If you don't open the door instantly I'll break it open."

On that, the key was turned, and the door pulled inwards a few inches. The room was in darkness. Denys made out a figure partially undressed standing in the shadowy gap. He took it to be Mary's.

"What's the meaning of——"

He did not get beyond that. Joyce's voice startled him.

"What are you making such a dreadful disturbance about, Denys?" she asked querulously. "You woke me up."

Gaping at her in astonishment he said:

"You here! I thought you were in Nottingham."

"Yes, I know. I came up this afternoon. We open at Brighton to-morrow. I suppose I've the right to sleep in my own house if I want to?"

He was on the point of acquiescing in that and of adding an apology to it, when a faint sound from within the room fell on his ears. Barely audible as it was, he recognised it as suppressed breathing.

"Who's in there?" he demanded. "And why is the light turned off?"

A dreadful suspicion—not the vague one of a minute ago—was creeping over him. Joyce's silence and her indecision seemed to justify it. He pushed past her and switched on the light. It fell full on a man standing by the bed.

In one comprehensive glance Denys took in the

situation : the disarranged bed, Joyce with a wrapper over her nightgown, the man minus collar and shoes. Him he recognised as the one he had seen at the Hotel Beffroi.

Somehow, nothing in the despicable scene surprised him. For one fleeting moment he was charged with fiery passion. It subsided, and he was cold and calm. Obscurely, he was conscious of a feeling of relief. He looked from one to the other.

" I opine it's superfluous to ask if you have anything to say for yourselves," he observed contemptuously.

Neither of them was ready with a reply. One seemed to be hovering on Joyce's lips. But before she could speak a fourth person appeared on the scene. It was Mary. In hat and outdoor clothes she stood in the doorway, a scared look on her face. The glare Joyce gave her sent her back a step in retreat.

" Stay where you are, Mary," enjoined Denys.

Joyce forced up a discordant laugh.

" Oh, have a witness by all means," she said defiantly. " I don't care. I'm not going to eat humble pie. And I shouldn't advise you to, either, Charlie."

" Put your shoes on, and get out—quick."

Milward flinched at the short tone of command.

" Oh, I'm not going to hit you. You're not worth it." Denys turned to Joyce. " This thing, I take it, is your idea of a man—the one you threatened me a thrashing from ! I can't say I admire your taste—in men ! Faugh ! "

His scorn fired up a spark of bravado in Milward.

" Well, and what sort of a man are you ? What about Euzentern or the girl—— "

" Silence ! " thundered Denys. " I don't want to contaminate myself by touching you, but, by God, if you're not out of my house inside of half a minute I'll pull your foul tongue out ! "

Milward crumpled up. Without another articulate word he went, muttering inaudibly.

With a sign Denys dismissed Mary. Then, closing the door, he addressed Joyce.

" Of course this ends it between you and me. For years you've made my life a burden. Now I'm through with you. You have your theatre engagement, so there's no need to go into your immediate future, but as I've no desire to treat you harshly, however much you deserve it, I'll make some provision for you. For the rest, you will hear from my lawyers. That's all I have to say."

He turned towards the door.

" Stop ! " she cried and went on in a whirl of words : " Before you go you'd better hear what *I* have to say. Your threat of lawyers means, of course, that you propose to go for a divorce. All right, do, I'm not going to stop you. I'm quite as sick of you as you say you are of me. You heard what I said about not eating humble pie. I mean it. You needn't think you're going to have it all your own way. I can go to a lawyer as well as you, and I intend to. Your carryings on

came before mine, remember. Yes, I'm speaking of you and that girl at Euzentern. I'm going to make her face the music of the Divorce Court as well as you——"

"You dare!"

"You bet I do!" In her fury she spat the words. "Do you think I'm a damned fool? Do you think I'd be here with Milward if I hadn't got the whip hand of you? You've been pulling out the contemptuous stop a lot to-night. It's my turn now." She snapped her fingers in his face. "I don't care that for your sneers, because I'm going to make you pay for them through the woman whose innocence you're always protesting. Now you know what to expect."

Poor Denys. He only just managed to conceal his dismay. In threatening Evelyn, Joyce had veritably tied his hands. The bare idea of his loved one being subjected unjustifiably to the ordeal of the Divorce Court turned his heart to water. What could he do with this shrew of a woman who somehow had found his one vulnerable spot and was ready to strike at it out of sheer spite and unwarranted jealousy?

"Yes," he said tonelessly, "you would do that."

To her it sounded like indifference, as though he had expected some such retort and did not intend to let it affect his intentions. She had moved to the bed and seated herself on it. She wasn't sure of her counterstroke. She didn't know how shrewdly it had gone home. Judging Cradeley's niece by her own standard

and his, she did not in reality think she would be any more averse from the publicity of the Divorce Court than she was herself. In reality, moreover, she was bluffing. All she was out for was to get what she could out of Denys. She wasn't as ready as she pretended to institute proceedings against him. She knew that two wrongs did not make a right, and that after to-night's happenings with Mary as a witness she would have a very thin case to bring into court. She was also considering another point. If she put no impediment in Denys' way of procuring a decree against her he would agree to pay heavily for the privilege. She was well aware of his horror of publicity. In that case there would be no damages to share with Cradeley. She would be able to treat the letter she had signed in his office as "a scrap of paper."

"Of course I should," she replied. "Why should I spare her, any more than you?" She paused purposefully. "Unless, of course, you prefer to make it worth my while not to. Personally, I hate any kind of compromise. It wouldn't have occurred to me to suggest one, if you hadn't had the decency of saying something about making provision for me."

Eagerly Denys jumped at the bait. It came as a perfect godsend.

"What do you mean by 'worth while'?" he enquired.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, if I sued, naturally I should go for damages. An amount

consistent with your means and income. I should have a right to that."

Denys was about to say, "If you won your case." He quelled the quibble.

"I don't dispute that," he said. "What damages would you expect?"

"I think two thousand pounds would be fair."

"Very well; you shall have them. Conditionally, of course, that I institute proceedings and that you don't cause me extra expense by defending the case. As it is, I shall have to mortgage this house to raise the money."

"Sorry I can't help that. I've got to live."

"Quite so. Then I'll go into it with my solicitors. Anything else?"

"No, I don't think so."

He went to the door. His heart was beating with elation. What did the money matter so long as by it he secured immunity for Evelyn?

"Good-night," he said, and passed out of the room.

CHAPTER VII

He found a taxi a little way from the house, threw in his suitcase and gave the driver his club address. It was the first one he thought of. On arrival there he booked a bedroom and went out again, an involuntary slave to the necessity of movement, of any physical activity to counteract his mental commotion. Also involuntarily he walked south-westwards, drawn in that direction by thoughts of Evelyn. He had no conscious intention of disturbing her at this time of night, but when, after traversing Knightsbridge and the Brompton Road, he found himself in Harrington Gardens, he slowed down. Lights were still on in the hall at "Highfield," and the porter was at the door seeing some visitor off. Denys stopped to enquire whether Miss Stanton was still up.

The porter's reply took him by surprise. Miss Stanton, he was informed, had left. She and Miss Brown had gone to Crawford Street, just off Golden Square. The number, according to his recollection, was fifteen.

Denys thanked him and turned about. He wondered why they had moved. But, of course, his absence in Shropshire explained why Evelyn had not informed him

of her change of address. He supposed that she and Iris had found a more desirable residence—a less expensive one probably. Back along the route he had just traversed he went, his mind full of her.

It was nearing midnight. Traffic had decreased. Comparative quietude reigned in the streets. Denys, disinclined for bed, and with a foreknowledge of a sleepless night, thought he might as well walk on to Crawford Street. It would be some little consolation just to look at the outside of Evelyn's new home.

Crawford Street was unfamiliar to him. He crossed Piccadilly Circus and began searching for it. At the further end of Golden Square he heard a patter of footsteps behind him. Then a light laugh rang out. He stopped. The footsteps drew nearer. Two figures emerged from shadow and suddenly halted before him.

"Why, it's Denys!" cried Evelyn. "Hugh told me you were away in the country."

"I've just got back," he said.

"And lost no time in looking us up," Iris exclaimed. 'Good man! We're only just round the corner. Come along."

She caught hold of one of his arms, marching him along. Evelyn hung on to the other.

"I only got your new address half an hour ago," he explained. "The porter at 'Highfield' gave it me. When—why did you leave there?"

"Tell you all about it in a minute. Where have *you* been?"

Answer and question followed in quick succession until they came to a stop before a big old house just out of the square. Iris whipped out a latchkey and ed the way up a broad stone staircase to the third floor. It was partitioned off from the rest of the house and had its own entrance. This she opened and switched on lights.

Denys followed the two girls through a small square hall into a big oak-panelled room only partially furnished.

"Welcome to the royal suite! The Gem of Soho!" Iris declaimed. "Come and look at the rest of it."

Denys was taken on a tour of inspection. With pride he was conducted into two admirable bedrooms, a white-tiled bathroom and a small kitchen full of the latest appliances.

"Electric cooker; automatic water-heater; tradesmen's lift to the basement; electric fires in all the rooms; everything you can want!" enthused Evelyn. "Isn't it scrumptious, Denys?"

"Perfectly wonderful and charming. What kind of Aladdin's lamp did you employ to get it?"

"Iris, do tell him!"

And back in the sitting-room Iris did, relating with glee how she had executed her coup in Kalatungs, or at least as much of it as she thought necessary; how she had bought the lease of the house at a bargain

price and mortgaged it to her bankers. All the lower floors were let as offices at rentals which not only paid the interest on the mortgage but in addition brought in four hundred a year and allowed her to live rent free as well.

"We only got in two days ago," she said. "We're not quite straight yet. Have to get most of our meals out. To-night we dined with the great Sir Alfred. We left him at the Piccadilly Hotel, talking business to a brother financier."

"And walked back," Evelyn added. "If we hadn't we should have missed you, Denys dear."

He gave her a fond look.

"I think"—he spoke reflectively—"my luck is turning."

Her head went up enquiringly. But he turned to Iris.

"Then he doesn't bear you any ill-will?"

"Sir Alfred? Oh no," she laughed. "We're quite good friends now. He's beginning to find me rather indispensable." And then she, too, became reflective.

Suddenly remembering the calls of hospitality, Evelyn jumped up from her chair.

"How thoughtless we are! We haven't offered you a drink. Whisky-and-soda, Denys?"

"Thanks, yes."

Directly she had gone to fetch it, Iris said:

"You're out of tune, my dear."

"Do I show it?" he asked.

"Noticed it when we met you. Mind my saying something personal?"

"No."

"Well, Eve's told me about that affair at the Belgian hotel and what her uncle's been up to since. Is that what's worrying you?"

"No; you can disregard that."

"You know he's been keeping a watch on her. He's doing the same thing here. Stop me if I'm being indiscreet, but that involves you, doesn't it?"

Denys nodded.

"Your wife's in it, I suppose?"

Startled, he said: "I never thought of that! Look here, Iris, I'd like to tell you. You—you're a staunch friend. It'll do me good to—to get it off my chest. I—I got home unexpectedly to-night and—and found a man with my wife."

Like a flash came the question: "Have you got a witness?"

"Yes, the housemaid."

Evelyn, with a tray of drinks, came in to see Iris hugging him.

"Eve, take that stuff away!" she cried. "Nothing less than champagne to-night. We've got a bottle somewhere."

"What's the joke?"

"Never you mind, old thing. It'll keep."

Bewildered but amused, Evelyn got the bottle from

the sideboard. Iris unwired it with a button-hook. The cork popped. The wine creamed into the tumblers. Iris raised hers.

"Denys, here's love. Eve, second the motion."

Dutifully Evelyn said: "My love to you, Denys."

"Thanks, my dears," said he. "I'm very happy."

"Mayn't I know now what it's all about?" Evelyn enquired.

With nervous haste, Denys looked at his watch.

"Good Lord! It's past one o'clock. I must be off. I'm staying at my club. They'll lock me out if I'm not quick."

He kissed them both—Evelyn last and with perhaps a little extra fervour—and fairly took to his heels.

CHAPTER VIII

INEVITABLE reaction descended on Denys. Lawyers, bankers and business claimed his time and attention. It humiliated him to have to go into the distasteful details of Joyce's infidelity; it irritated him to have to raise money on his house to satisfy her rapacity. That transaction seemed to rob it of all sense of home. With the exception of the servants' quarters he shut it up and lived entirely in his studio.

But November had come in bleak and cold. Of light for painting there was none. That nepenthe was denied him. Mortification and loss of spirits made him avoid his friends. Worst of all, necessity compelled him to abstain from practically all intercourse with Evelyn. Although Joyce had accepted service of the citation for divorce and his lawyers had the assurance of hers that she would not contest it, he denied himself the consolation that intimacy with his beloved would have given him. Iris was his only medium of communication with her. That good friend of theirs proved her staunchness during these trying days.

Early in December the case came on for hearing. There was no defence; but the ordeal of having to give evidence, though it lasted no more than a quarter of an hour in an almost empty court, shook Denys to his centre. The day after the *decree nisi* was pronounced he packed up his painting materials and took train for St. Bridget's. There in solitude and prolonged hard work he gradually regained tranquillity of mind.

He received two letters from Hugh and Stephen. Ostensibly they were meant to be consolatory. Joyce had never been any favourite of theirs. But through both there ran a secondary theme, that of Evelyn; and in each case the writer expressed a strong disbelief concerning his qualifications as an Ambassador at the Court of Love. The disgruntled complaint brought to Denys' lips the first smile he had indulged in for many weeks.

CHAPTER IX

IRIS pulled off a little black felt hat of the peculiarly plain neatness that stamps it as a product of the rue de la Paix or else some exclusive millinery establishment in Bond Street. She had become very fastidious in her taste in dress these days. Taking up a jaunty position on the hearthrug she lit a cigarette and directed a roguish smile at Evelyn.

"Like to hear the latest city intelligence?" she enquired.

"My dear, I should never understand it. Some of your shares gone up?"

"In a sense, yes. Oh, certainly my stock has risen. Or, put another way, I've gone into voluntary liquidation."

"All Greek to me," protested Evelyn.

Iris puffed a smoke ring into the air. "I've had a proposition—I mean a proposal."

"Sounds like Euclid."

"It's much more entertaining."

"Well, spit it out, my dear." Evelyn put aside the newspaper she was reading and prepared to listen.

"Going to get married." The red lips made the announcement quite placidly.

"*You* are! *Iris!*"

"Thought it would startle you a bit. Yes, old thing, I've speculated in a husband for a change."

Evelyn, eyes wide in stupefaction, rose from her chair.

"Who is he?"

"Give a guess."

"Not . . . ?"

"Yes, Napp. I've gone it."

Evelyn went up to her and planted a couple of kisses on her cheeks.

"Darling! I congratulate you. A thousand happy wishes. When—where did he——"

"At lunch, in the Savoy grill. With the fish."

Iris suddenly threw off her insouciant air. Putting an arm round Evelyn, she plumped with her on to the sofa.

"I'll tell you all about it. Of course I'd seen it coming. Ever since that night we dined with him at the Piccadilly. And yesterday was the turning point. He was keen on going a 'bull' of rubber. I put him off it and advised Celanese shares instead. This morning they jumped eight points. Yes, I know you don't understand; but he raked in over twenty thousand pounds. Hence the Savoy lunch. At first he only talked business; said a lot of complimentary things about my knack in spotting a good

thing and so on and so forth. I thought he was going to offer me a commission on the profit he'd made. But he suddenly said: 'I suppose you're not going to keep single all your life'; and I said, 'Why not?' And he said: 'Because I want to marry you, my dear. Waiter, hurry up with that fish.' And then he went on: 'Dashed if I'm going to let you marry anyone else. You're too valuable to lose. Well, what about it?' 'Is that firm?' I asked. 'Bed-rock,' he answered. 'You shall have it in writing if you like.' And to show he was in earnest he scribbled his proposal on the back of the menu and chucked it across the table."

"And was that all?"

"All for the moment. I wanted to think. Funny thing: although I always said I wouldn't marry a man unless he'd got ten thousand a year, I didn't feel a bit mercenary. So I put him off until we were in a taxi on the way back to the city. Of course we got into a traffic block at Ludgate Circus. And then he took my hand and kissed it so nicely and said he loved me as if he really meant it and I caved in. He's really an old dear—out of business."

"That's what I thought," agreed Evelyn. "Except when he spoke to me on the 'phone. When are you going to get married, darling?"

"Second week in June."

"Why just then?"

Iris smiled mischievously.

"Because. . . . Oh, by the way, won't Denys have got his decree absolute by that time ?"

Evelyn gave her a hug.

"Lady Napp," she said, "you're altogether too quick at figures!"

Part Four

CHAPTER X

IF MISS EVELYN STANTON, formerly Companion and Secretary to the late MRS. LOUISA MARIBON, will call on the undersigned she will hear of SOMETHING TO HER ADVANTAGE. Woodruff and Weatherly, Solicitors, 397, Lincoln's Inn Fields, W.C.

Evelyn read the advertisement twice, scarcely breathing the while. To see her name in print gave her a most unpleasant sensation. It seemed to shriek at her; in a manner of speaking it stripped her naked for all the world to stare at.

Solicitors! Something to her advantage! Was it a joke—a practical joke, inserted by some leg-puller in Chelsea? That lot were always up to mischief. But no, none of them knew of her connection with Mrs. Maribon, except Hugh and one or two others, and they wouldn't do anything so beastly.

Then if it wasn't a "rag" what could be the meaning of it? Evelyn wasn't so unsophisticated as to misunderstand that "something to her advantage" implied a gain of some sort, possibly money. Mrs. Maribon might have left her a legacy. But she wasn't

a rich woman. If she had been she wouldn't have gone to Euzentern on account of its cheapness. So it couldn't be much.

And the advertisement sounded serious, coming as it did from solicitors. Evelyn, like most of her sex, was not free from suspicion of the Law. She associated solicitors with policemen and arrests and handcuffs and cross-examinations and hard labour and the Black Cap and bail!

"Ugh!" she went. "What ought I to do? I do wish Iris was here!"

Badly wanting advice, she thought of Denys; but he was further off than Iris. In the end she went to the telephone and called up the city office. Iris herself answered her. Breathlessly Evelyn told her about the advertisement. Iris made light of it; told her to go and see what it meant, and promised to be home by tea-time to here the result.

Forthwith Evelyn put on hat and coat and took the 'bus to the Law Courts. She knew that Lincoln's Inn Fields was not far from that forbidding building. Ten minutes after alighting she was being shown into Mr. Woodruff's private office. To her relief there was nothing alarming about his appearance. Quite pleasantly he drew from her a variety of details regarding her association with Mrs. Maribon and jotted them down. They seemed to satisfy him. Then he said:

"So you only saw our advertisement this afternoon, Miss Stanton? It has been appearing daily for over a week."

Evelyn told him that she seldom looked at newspaper advertisements.

"Well, we'll assume for the moment that you are the lady we are in search of. Proof of that can be ascertained later on. In the meantime, have you anything by which we could identify you?"

Rather proud of her forethought, Evelyn produced her Belgian passport.

"Will this do?"

Mr. Woodruff looked at her photograph and the date stamp impressed on it.

"Very well indeed. Quite well," he said, smiling at her. "Have you any idea of the reason of our search for you, Miss Stanton?"

"I rather came to the conclusion"—she hesitated—"that Mrs. Maribon might have left me some little keepsake."

Mr. Woodruff smiled more broadly.

"Something more than a keepsake. As a matter of fact, by her will she appoints you—that is she appoints Miss Evelyn Stanton—her residuary legatee."

"I'm not sure that I quite know what a residuary legatee is."

"No? Well, in other words, she bequeathed to you her property. The whole of it."

"Oh! I didn't know she had any property to leave. Is it much?"

"Relatively speaking, yes. Between twenty and twenty-five thousand pounds."

"And—and she left all that to me? You mean it—seriously, Mr. Woodruff?"

"Lawyers never joke—in business, Miss Stanton," was the beaming reply. "This news I gather takes you by surprise?"

"I—I can't believe it! I knew she liked me—was fond of me, but . . ." Bereft of words, she could only stare at him.

"Still, those are the facts. And as soon as we can establish your identity—a simple matter no doubt—and complete the necessary formalities, we shall have the pleasure of putting you in possession of the estate. Meanwhile, allow me to congratulate you, Miss Stanton." For an elderly and normally staid man of the law his eyes expressed pointed admiration of his pretty visitor. "Heartily congratulate you. It is a great pleasure—though an uncommon one—to administer a bequest such as this. If I may say so"—he bowed gallantly—"it is a proof that for once in a way a fortune has been disposed of in a most praiseworthy manner."

After some further talk and a little fatherly advice as to prudence in the use she should make of her legacy, he said:

"I think, under the circumstances, we might make

you a small advance on your inheritance. Say one hundred pounds for your present needs. How will that do ? "

" Thank you," Evelyn replied with a gulp.

Mr. Woodruff opened a cheque book.

" Have you a bank account ? "

" No, I keep my money at the post office."

" Then I'll leave the cheque open, so that you can cash it. It's on Lloyd's branch in Aldwych, close by."

He filled it in and handed it to her, together with a receipt, which she signed ; and the interview was at an end.

" You shall hear from us in due course," he said as, he shook her hand. " I have your address."

It was a bewildered Evelyn that tottered out into Lincoln's Inn Fields. She hardly yet realised her good fortune. With the object of getting manifestation of it she went straight to the bank and presented the cheque.

" How will you take it ? " enquired the cashier.

" In my bag," she answered dreamily.

He thought she was " getting at him." But the absent look in her eyes undeceived him. With a shrug which conveyed his poor opinion of feminine ways concerning money matters, he poked a sheaf of Bank of England and Treasury notes under the grille.

Evelyn stuffed them into her handbag and with no jot of her incredulity abated left the bank. She was void of volition. She wandered along the pavement in an objectless way.

The day was one of those rare April ones that herald spring—a day of intermittent sunshine and scurrying white clouds; of bursts of warmth and gusts of energising wind. It roused her up, gave her an impulse to place her hundred pounds in safety and to unburden her soul to Iris.

A taxi took her home. She flew up the stairs and burst into the flat. Iris was waiting for her and tea was ready.

"I—I've been there!" she panted. "The solicitors'. It—it's true!" She rummaged in her bag; held out the notes. "Look. A hundred pounds!"

"Good business! Mrs. Maribon leave it to you?"

"She—she's left me twenty—twenty-five thousand pounds! I'm not sure which."

"My hat!"

"I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels!"

Iris put an arm round her.

"Steady, my dear. Sit down. I'll give you a cup of tea." She began pouring out. "A sedative is what you want. So do I. I'm as excited as you are."

They each took a scalding mouthful.

"You ought to have looked in your cup yesterday. I bet you'd have seen a fortune in the tea-leaves. Twenty-five thousand! It's a knock-out! Wish you joy, darling. Now tell me all about it."

And in rapturous jerks Evelyn gave her all the details. Iris let her talk on. At times she wasn't quite certain who was being referred to—Mr. Woodruff, Mrs. Maribon or the bank clerk. But it didn't matter. She guessed her way through the exciting story. Every word of it was a huge delight to her.

"Well," she said when Evelyn came to a stop, "it took me two days to rake in six thousand, and you've done over three times as well in about twenty minutes! Business acumen simply isn't in it with merit. You deserve all your good luck, darling. And that reminds me." A wicked smile lit up her face. "I found a letter from Denys at the office this morning. His picture—the big one with you in it—has been accepted at the Academy. Of course that was a foregone conclusion. But it's to be hung in the principal gallery—the King's Room, he calls it. He thought you'd like to hear the news."

Evelyn put down her cup.

"How does he know?"

"Hugh Wingfield wrote him. By the way, he says he's coming home."

Coming home! Coming home! Coming home!

The two words sang in Evelyn's heart. Life seemed beautiful and miraculous and full of exquisite promise.

CHAPTER XI

DENYS stood in the deserted drawing-room of Corner Cottage frowning at its sheeted furniture and forlorn appearance. An overwhelming desire was on him to have it radically transformed : to have the whole house renovated, redecorated, repainted ; to rehang pictures, replace carpets and curtains ; rearrange the furniture, re-upholster chairs and settees. He hungered to have everything cleaned, freed from the contaminated past.

"Could do that if I sell the picture," he thought.

His "varnishing ticket" had brought him back to London. He had gone to Burlington House to find his picture "Undine Ashore" hung on the line in a prominent position and also reproduced in the principal illustrated weeklies and the official illustrated guide. He had stood before it trying to estimate its artistic qualities, not at all sure that it had any, until a voice behind him exclaimed : "In my opinion that's the *clou* of the exhibition. Look at the way the figure of that entrancing girl in green is laid in ! Going to be the picture of the year." And

he had turned to find that the speaker was none other than the President himself. Shy of being recognised, he had slunk away, but inordinately heartened.

His affairs were in an inextricable mess. What with legal expenses, the interest on his mortgage, the expense in keeping on two servants whom, out of good nature, he had continued to retain for six idle months, and the number of unbought pictures stacked in his studio with their faces to the wall, he was for the first time for years financially embarrassed. Had it not been for the prospect of an early and final legal severance of his marriage bonds and the underlying hope that Evelyn inspired in him, he would ere this have descended into the Slough of Despond.

Those two inspirations kept him going through the dragging days. The first of May slipped by. He did not go to the Private View. Pending the announcement that his divorce decree had been made absolute, he had not the heart to meet his fellow creatures. It was due on the eighth of the month. On the ninth he would be a free man.

On the morning of that day he was up early, waiting in frantic impatience for the delivery of the newspaper. It came, and with it an end to his suspense. Under the heading "To-day's Cause List—Prob. Div. Court III," he read of his deliverance. A little before eleven o'clock he received confirmation of it by telephone from his solicitors.

Like a cast-off weight his inertia dropped from him. He was aware of physical expansion, mental clarity. It took the form of a feverish desire to see and to be with Evelyn.

He dashed off to Crawford Street. She was not there. The maid who opened the door said she had gone out half an hour ago, she did not know where. In the hope of finding her at Hugh's, Denys took a taxi to Tite Street. Again he drew blank. Hugh's manservant had seen nothing of her that morning. Bitterly disappointed, Denys turned away. He had no clue to her whereabouts. There was nothing for him to do now but trust to the telephone. At intervals he could ring her up and so ultimately catch her. What an infernal fool he had been not to do that before he left Hampstead! Now, hours would elapse before she would be at home again and get his call.

So as to be in her vicinity he boarded an eastward bound 'bus, intending to get off at Piccadilly Circus. Crawford Street was but a stone's throw from there. He would wait an hour and then ring her up from some call-office. At the Ritz he got off the 'bus and walked the rest of the way. Walking, he could dupe himself into the belief that he was shortening the intolerable wait.

As he approached Burlington House he looked at his watch. Useless to 'phone her yet awhile. He might as well put in half an hour in the Galleries. He turned in at the gateway.

The place was very full. He elbowed his way from room to room, stopping only to look at her two portraits done by Hugh and Stephen. He had seen them on varnishing day. They were good, yes; but unless he was mistaken they missed something: the *spirituel* poise and expression that he believed he had imbued her with in his own picture.

He moved on into the next room where it hung to make a comparison. Sightseers, standing three deep before it, obscured all but the upper portion from view. He had a moment of elation and then turned away, his wrist raised for another glance at his watch.

And then he saw her. She was within six feet of him, her eyes on his. After a palsied moment he took a step towards her. Their hands met. He stammered out:

"I've been hunting for you all the morning. Been to your flat—and Tite Street. Was just going to 'phone you."

His pulses were beating a tattoo. He saw her lips quiver and her breast heave.

"I came to look at your picture." A queer little laugh broke from her. "I couldn't get near it."

The moving throng jostled them. She was lurched closer to him.

"When did you get back?" she asked.

He mumbled a date.

"You might have let me know, Denys."

"I—oh, let's get out of this! Can't talk here."

Steering her, pushing his way along, they reached the exit gate. After descending the two short flights of stairs, Denys paused in the vestibule. An endless succession of people was coming in. The courtyard was blocked with cars and taxis. He wanted to be alone with her. He couldn't talk to her in crowded Piccadilly. He couldn't wait till they got to her flat. Taking her by the elbow he led her to the basement staircase on the left.

"Where are you taking me?" she enquried.

"Diploma room. It'll be quiet down there."

It was not only quiet, it was deserted. The swing-door fell to behind them. And then he remarked how prosperous she looked. It struck him as an ironical comment on his own appearance, his shabby old clothes, his reduced circumstances. Hers apparently were flourishing. Could he, dared he, ask her to share his straitened lot? He couldn't get a word out.

It was she who broke the trying silence, gave him an opening which in his bemused state he did not seize.

"You know Iris is going to be married?"

"No," he replied heedlessly.

"To Sir Alfred Napp."

"Oh, really." He took a pull at his wavering courage. "Evelyn, I brought you down here to tell you—I'm free."

"Yes, I know. I saw it in the *Times*. It must be a tremendous relief to you, Denys."

"It is. Did you look for it because—I mean, purposely?" he stammered.

"No," she prevaricated. "I've got into the habit of reading the advertisements and those sort of things. There was one about me a month ago."

"About *you*?" He stared. Could she be referring to the divorce section of the newspapers? "How do you mean?"

"You remember Mrs. Maribon? I told you about her in Euzentern."

He nodded.

"Well, she left me some money, and I was advertised for. I went——"

"Yes, yes." Relief and impatience made him interrupt. "Never mind that now."

"But, Denys, aren't you interested? Think what a difference it makes to me. I might have bought 'Undine Ashore' if I'd been quicker."

He thought she was talking at random. In an optimistic moment he had set a price of fifteen hundred guineas on his picture.

"Quicker! I don't understand."

She shot a curious look at him. Was he pretending that he didn't know of the reported purchase of "Undine Ashore" by the Chantrey Bequest? Hadn't he noticed the crowd which that report had attracted around it? Apparently, he hadn't yet heard it,

How else account for his rueful countenance? She was bursting to give him the good news. But she was chagrined by his lack of interest in her legacy, and caprice put a bridle on her tongue.

"Don't you wan't to sell it?" she demanded.

This parley was side-tracking him.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because. . . Oh well, you'd better know. My affairs are all at sixes and sevens. That's why I don't know how to say—what I want to."

"What do you want to say?"

"That I'm so infernally hard up—in debt in fact—that I've no right to think about you—to tell you . . . Oh, what's the good!"

"And yet, upstairs, you said you'd been hunting for me all the morning! What for?"

His mouth opened, but only to stammer.

In the quiet of the ill-lit room she laid her hands on his shoulders and shook him.

"Oh, Denys, Denys, you dear . silly! If you refuse to tell me what I'm dying to hear you'll make me do something desperate. What do I care whether you're hard up or not? You won't always be. You're perfectly incomprehensible. First you try to make me marry Hugh or Stephen. Then you run away and hide yourself. And now you go on as if I were the last person to be considered. I won't stand it any longer." She snuggled up against him. "Denys, don't you *care*?"

He capitulated. He couldn't hold out against those last pleading words. His arms slipped round her.

"Do I care? Ye gods! I've been waiting for six endless months to say how much I care! Darling, I love you! I'm starving for you! I want to marry you!"

A quip, picked up from Iris, came into Evelyn's head.

"Is that firm?" she pressed.

Denys made it so.

Outside in the courtyard they circled the mass of parked cars and the streaming taxis. The May sunshine poured down upon them. Pausing at the arched entrance, they surveyed the gay pageant of Piccadilly like a pair of young gods who had just made a new world.

And they saw that it was good.

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